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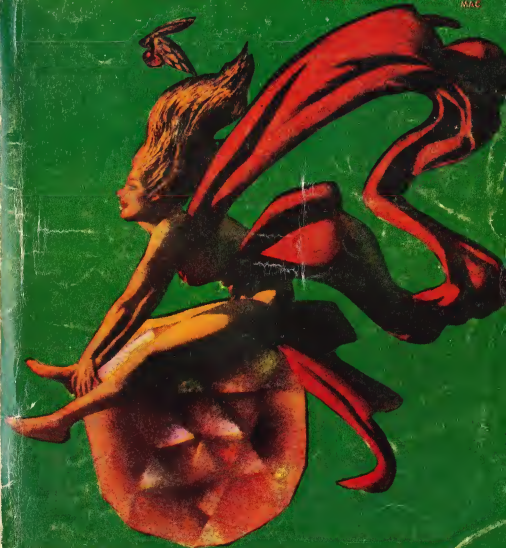


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FANTASY FICTION

NOVEMBER 1953 35c
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WEB OF THE WORLDS BY H. HARRISON AND MACLEAN
STORIES BY FLETCHER PRATT AND L. SPRAGUE deCAMP

FANTASY FICTION MAGAZINE NOV 1953

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FANTASY FICTION

NOVEMBER, 1953

Volume 1, Number 4

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COVER BY BOK • ILLUSTRATIONS BY BERWIN • EBEL • KRENKEL • SMITH • SUSSMAN

FANTASY FICTION is published bi-monthly by Future Publications, Inc., 80 Fifth Avenue, New York 11, N. Y. All stories in this issue are new and have not previously been published. No actual persons are designated in works of fiction, either by name or character; any similarity is coincidental. Copyright 1953 by Future Publications, Inc. All rights, including translation reserved. Entered as second-class matter at the Post Office, at New York, N. Y. Subscriptions \$2.00 per year in the United States and Possessions; \$2.50 per year in Canada; \$3.00 elsewhere. Not responsible for unsolicited manuscripts or art work. All submissions must include return postage to expedite the return of manuscripts not acceptable.

CAMERON HALL • Editor

BILL BRADLEY • Circulation Mgr.

DAVID GELLER • Advertising Mgr.

MILTON BERWIN • Art Director

JOHN VINCENT • Associate Editor

H. L. MITCHELL • West Coast Office

\$2.00 per year in U. S. A.

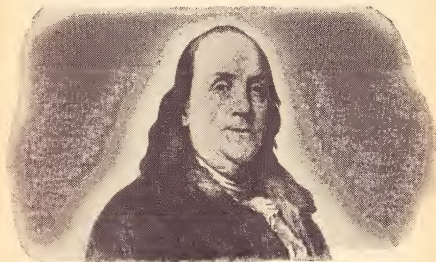
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35¢ per copy

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AN EDITORIAL ON NON MULTA, SED MULTUM

All good students of their grimoires, of course, recognize the need for a full understanding of Latin strung between the names of Lovecraftian gods which can't be pronounced in any of the sounds normal to Latin. It's as indispensable as pentagrams, mephitic odors, cold chills, and all the other arcane balderdash. But since classical endings have little to do with Satanism, a few advanced students of incantations are hereby informed that the above bit of showing off means *much, rather than many*; neophytes, of course, will be able to parse it for themselves.

That, in fact, is the whole trouble. In fantasy, neophytes always know and use more than advanced students. Recently, a story came in which had everything—ghosts were making a compact with a group of trolls, to defeat the Greek gods, now about to retake the world with a bunch of Hebraic letter-incantations. It was quite complicated, up to the third page where we stopped reading. Sometimes, we regret not having found what happened in the other forty thousand words—but not too much!

On the other hand, we remember stories from the pages of the late and greatly lamented *Unknown Worlds* which depended on using much of a single idea, instead of as many ideas as possible. H. L. Gold demonstrated that this could be hell; Fritz Leiber showed how all women might be witches; Jack Williamson decided that lycanthropes were simply other races of men; and Cleve Cartmill examined the fact that the books written about the war in Heaven had all been written by the victor. Those stories are ones we've read a dozen times, and will read at least a dozen more!

Fantasy, as we've been trying to point out, is a game of logic. Like fairy chess, it should be a game of logic where the basic rules are flexible, filled with some delightful surprise to twist the mind out of the rut, and must be played with consummate skill to be at all interesting. It requires a healthy, flexible mind to write or enjoy it; a man who is superstitious or filled with fantasies can't be logical about his beliefs—the human animal is most logical when least concerned at his basic emotional level, of course.

But above all else, it must have limits. Nobody can be logical about chaos, or can extend his thinking to a level where he can handle everything in the universe at once. In any given story, one really well handled idea is enough for all the play of logic that can be brought

to bear. If you start with just one twisted fact and bring severe logic to it, you'll soon have a library of ideas. Suppose you assume for the moment some women are witches. Why aren't all women? Is the witch's soul involved? Why, if so, did she become a witch? What will it cost her, how is her profession changed by modern life? There are new drugs—what ones will she use? Why aren't witches seen?

You can couple in the Devil, add some tatter of superstition here and some other there to explain it—and end up with a mishmash, but without logic. Suppose you simply assume that witches are women who have developed certain limited, perhaps traditional, powers. From there, you can move on by complete, cold logic to a world of lovely, cockeyed structure without adding any further nonsense.

The logic of fantasy operates exactly as the logic of mathematics. Math doesn't require that the basic statement be true, but simply that all procedure from it be according to sound rules. And likewise, math works by figuring out more and more from the original statement, not by adding further statements to it.

Not many, but much—or not a host of ideas, but one idea fully developed—is a basic rule here.

Interestingly, it doesn't matter what that one idea is, apparently. The cold chills and horror have been well represented in the past by writers who took the fairly simple idea that men had no business here at all, for some reason or other. And likewise, the quick chuckles and wry appreciation of humor have been equally common, from that identical idea. Exactly the same basic plot can be given to fifty writers in the fantasy field, and there will be approximately sixty unrelated stories as a result.

Unfortunately, however, most of those stories won't be written; they'll be produced for oral consumption and for batting around in bull sessions. The game of logic sometimes becomes too much fun to play alone, as it must be played by a writer at the typewriter. The one idea develops so many fascinating trails of logical possibilities that it's hard work selecting the ones that will make a good story.

The only way to do it at all, of course, is to stick rigidly to making much of one idea, adding any others to it will only result in utter confusion. In fact, it's a well known truism that too many spooks spoil the broth, and that a witch in time saves nine.

Besides, if there are too many elements, the result is pure fantasy. And that, of course, is the one thing no real lover of modern fantasy can stand!

Web of the Worlds

BY HARRY HARRISON AND
KATHERINE MacLEAN

Grant O'Reilly had always been a good boy and a proper man—before the Unicorn Ring lifted his life strand and shoved it down among the ghouls, Berl-Cats, Von Neuman players—and improper death!

The Three Norns, weavers of men's destiny, sit in the dusty hall of eternity with the glittering tapestry of the dimensions before them. Their aged fingers move tirelessly over the strands—twisting, weaving and joining

in an infinity of combinations.

Each strand is a life. As they guide the strands they guide the lives. Their voices rise and fall in a constant murmur; they pass the single eye, one to the other, to watch the weaving of





this incredible fabric. The voices grow louder, their tones change. Man's destiny is not always smooth.

"No, stop, you cannot bring that world line here."

"It makes the pattern . . ."

"It makes the pattern worse. I will have to make changes in my section."

"Destroyed, I say; ruined. The work of centuries!"

The voices grow louder, there is a hint of anger in the tones. "Stop, Grissel, stop. Those changes cannot be made." Her hand flicks across the tapestry in an angry gesture.

There is a ring on the middle finger, the Unicorn Ring. The ring brushes the surface and the Unicorn's horn catches in one of the tiny glittering threads of a human life—and pulls it loose.

"I'll do it my way—give me the eye."

The argument continues. The thread of a man's fate floats unattached in space, unnoticed.

I

"Sorry, mother, it doesn't fit."

"I got it in your size, Granty," Grant's mother said firmly. "Try it on again and see if it really doesn't fit."

Grant O'Reilly tried it on. He knew very well that it wouldn't fit, and it didn't. The coat was

tight across the shoulders and his wrists stuck three inches of cuff out past the sleeves. He had gotten used to this kind of thing. His mother had bought all his clothes for the wedding, and as usual she had assumed he was younger than he was and gotten everything too small. This time it was serious. It was Sunday, and they had come a long way out of town for his wedding in this small church where Lucy's aunts and uncles and cousins had been married. There was no chance of buying or renting a morning coat.

He looked at himself in the mirror, trying to see himself in the eyes of Lucy's poised and influential relatives. No, it wouldn't do. Lucy would be dismayed, ashamed of him with his wrists sticking out like a gawky farm boy. He tried to tug the sleeves down. Today of all days, he had to look sophisticated, the way Lucy liked him to be.

His reflection stared back calfishly from the pier glass and made the same plucking gestures at the jacket cuffs. He didn't really like this tall, thin young fellow with the ash-blond hair. The eyebrows were so light that they were almost invisible, giving the face a gentle, saintly expression. When he was away from mirrors he always imagined himself stronger and dark-

er—the fit husband and defender of a lovely woman like Lucy.

Lucy! A warm glow flushed his face at the thought of her. It was more of a physical thought than a spiritual one and he felt that it somehow didn't belong in church. He turned from the glass and tried to shrug off the jacket and the thought at the same time.

Herb Collomb slumped in his chair against the far wall and puffed composedly on his ancient pipe. The strength in his solid form gave Grant a feeling of security—the same way it had done all the way through college. They had roomed together and graduated together. It was only fitting that Herb be his best man. Herb grinned around his pipe and Grant was surprised to find himself grinning back.

The vestry window was open and a warm breath of spring air blew in. A bird was singing somewhere outside; the whole world seemed very wonderful to Grant.

Then he looked at the ill-fitting coat he held in his hand and felt the unhappy tension building up inside himself. How could he get a new coat? But it was already too late to do anything; he could hear the warming-up notes of the organ and the shuffling feet of the guests

entering the chapel. He muttered a repressed *damn*.

"Don't swear, Grant. I'm sure Lucy would be very hurt if she heard you talk like that. She's from a very good family."

"I'm sorry, mother."

"That's right, dear. I always want to be proud my son is a gentleman."

Herb dropped his pipe and picked it up, looking somewhat red in the face.

Grant tried to smile, and then felt the old, sinking change coming. He tried to stop it. No, not now! Why did it have to be now? Once or twice in his life—by a great effort—he had managed to postpone an attack when its timing was bad.

But he would not be able to hold it back through the entire wedding. Better to get it over with and not spoil the wedding later. All he had to do was to get away from the voices and eyes and be alone for awhile. There was a thin ringing in his ears, coming closer. He stopped fighting it and let it come.

"There's ten minutes yet," he said, hastily over the singing in his ears and the feeling of growing distance between himself and all others. "I'm going to step out in the fresh air a moment."

There was a comfortable old graveyard outside, with slanted stones and long green grass and

a gnarled peach tree in full bloom. It was cut off from the outside world and the passage of time by a high stone wall. The side door of the vestry opened to a little flagged path that curved around the building, away from the observing eyes of windows. A private place for a moment at least.

"I have to avoid excitement," Grant thought, letting the door shut behind him. It was too late to avoid it now; he'd have to take his medicine. Anyone watching would have seen Grant's lips curl back from his teeth in an unhappy grimace that showed irregular canine teeth and changed his angelic appearance to a rather pleasant animal look, like a blond bird dog. He wandered on, past thought with the pounding in his head, unconsciously seeking a sheltered spot to let go. He found it, a deep right angle in the stone wall where it turned. He blundered off the path and into it and leaned forward against the wall, propped himself in a corner and waited for the petite mal, the time of stone-like unconsciousness.

There was no knowing how much time had passed, but the sudden pressure was gone and the thin ringing in his ears, and he could see and hear and feel again. He leaned there a moment

longer, grateful for the cool roughness of the stone against his forehead, thankful that he was not the kind who fell down and thrashed around. He could go stand quietly in the bathroom with the door shut and not frighten Lucy with it when they were married.

The sickness had deprived him of the games of childhood, hedged him around with the watchful care of his mother. It had taken away his freedom to risk and dare, leaving him only the second-hand adventures of poetry and books, but he was not going to let it take his marriage away from him. His hard-learned ability to feel the fit coming would let him live a normal life and earn money as an architect without his clients ever seeing anything wrong with him. With warning enough, there was always a quiet place where he could go to have an attack.

He turned and looked out across the greenness of the deep grass and the old stone wall with the small sandstone tombstones slanting right and left; everything was more vivid, as if sight were cleansed.

There was a window above his head and he could hear his mother's voice trickling out, very clear and distant, like a memory. "Granty has fits, you know. If he

gets excited, that is. It took me a great deal of trouble to get him exempted from athletics at all his schools without saying what his trouble was. His father had fits, too; they began after we were married. Such a sweet man. It runs in the family. They're sensitive, you know."

He ignored the unhappy feeling the words gave him and told himself that everything she did was for his good. She would take care of the jacket, too; she always fixed things so they came out the right way. He stood up to return inside.

Then he saw it.

It was long and white and huge. It was like a giant bar or an elephant's tusk stretching across the sky from horizon to horizon. One instant it was as far away as eternity; the next it was swooping down towards him. He couldn't tell where that awareness came from, but he knew it was true. It was coming directly towards *him*. It was like being on the tracks in front of an express train.

Before he could scream—before the thought that formed the scream was fully born—it was too late. It struck without impact—softly with a sudden sensation of tremendous motion.

The world vanished. In his eye he could see the after-image

of the graveyard, the orange of the grass and the red of the sky. The bright colors slowly faded and were replaced by nothing.

That was the only word that described the sensations he felt. At first his mind went out in an expanding spiral of fear, then contracted back to something like sanity. He felt nothing, he heard nothing. What he saw was puzzling until he realized it was no-color. It was also not black. It was nearest to gray, a gray fog of velvet that pressed in on him from all sides.

With a heart-stopping shock he realized that he wasn't breathing. But his heart couldn't stop, because it wasn't beating. All the functions of his body were dead.

I am dead.

The thought had been scratching at the surface of his mind and now it gibbered its way in. His tightly held thoughts collapsed and his mind screamed out in madness.

There was no measurement of time or duration, so Grant had no idea how long the period lasted. It could have been years or seconds, but slowly it ebbed away. After the insanity came thoughts, but they helped no more than the madness; he had no idea where he was nor what had happened.

After the thoughts came boredom, and this lasted for eternity.

His mind became like his body and he hung there in the unchanging gray fog, changeless himself, and waited.

II

"Look now! Look what you've done. You've pulled one of the threads loose."

"I never—you're the one who did it when you were screaming at me that the pattern was wrong."

"Well the pattern is wrong..."

The argument continued and the second sister leaned forward to shout her opinion. The loose thread blew in her face and in anger she shoved it back into the fabric.

She did not weave it back into the pattern but pushed it in at random and returned to the argument.

Abruptly the grayness and silence was smashed by a screaming clamor and Grant found himself falling through air that seemed thick with sound. A filthy board floor came up and smote him, and he lay stunned for a moment amid the clamor of drunken howls, the smash of breaking bottles, the leathery thud and grunt of blows meeting flesh. Yellow light flickered

in his eyes and shadows surged above him, snarling.

There was a crunching thud almost directly above him and a man with a short scraggly beard and overlong hair tumbled heavily across Grant's legs. Blood began oozing from his ragged hair, and the shape of his head looked horribly dented.

With a reflex of revulsion, Grant yanked free from beneath the limp hulk and rose to a half crouch. A man had just been killed and dropped on top of him, and no one paid any attention. The crowd and howls had surged away from him and were somewhere else now, although running forms still went past to plunge into it.

Smoke of flickering tapers, the fumes of cooking, the stench of spilled wine and aged food assailed his nostrils and stung his eyes, but he could make out that the room was as big as a barn, with hand-hewn beams close overhead, reflecting back noise and heat and light, and further up, a roof lost in smoky shadows. The beams seemed to waver in the flickering light with the fury of the human sounds coming from below them.

The screaming crowd had grown until it was close again, but their backs were toward him. Ragged hair hung down below their ears; they waved staffs,

daggers and broken bottles threateningly, shouting at someone in the middle. Filthy shirts of rough brown, like burlap, covered each back, hanging over dirty fur pants.

Grant straightened and found that he was tall enough to see over the heads to the maelstrom in the center of the mob.

The crowd was attacking a big man who had his back to one of the supporting pillars. As Grant watched, the man lunged with a grunting shout, swung a sweeping blow with a long sword, flung himself back, fended a descending pole from his head with the flat of the sword, smashed back another with a thing like an iron Indian club in his left hand, carried the smash through with a lunge to the head of the staff wielder with a crunch, and lunged back to the pillar again. He moved in jerky stops and starts and retreats of extraordinary energy, slashing and fending, grunting in a half shout with each effort.

The athleticism of it was astonishing, but it was not that which froze Grant. It was the man's costume. The dull brown shine of leather armor, like a picture in an encyclopedia, the glint of chain mail, the broadsword, and the Indian club thing—a mace? It was something out of pre-medieval his-

tory. What was he doing here? For a moment, his eyes searched for a camera. But this was real blood, not ketchup.

Where was the way out? Crouching with the wary immobility of a hunted animal, Grant turned his head. Thick benches and tables were scattered around the empty half of the room, tapers flickered in bowls and added smoke to the murky air, overturned tables and spilled bottles littered the floor. Where was the door? The dimness and smoke confused his eyes, the ghastly sounds rocked in his brain. Where in the name of sanity were there even windows? What kind of place was this?

He moved away from the mob sounds, putting a long table between himself and the battle, but a crescendo howl turned him in time to see the end. The fighter in leather armor was temporarily confused; his sword lodged in a pole where its edge had turned and cut into the wood. He stood trying to free his sword. A pole, jabbed like a spear, took him in the cheekbone with a blow that canted his head over. His sword pulled free as he was hit, but he had no time to lift it. Jolted back and forth under the thud of heavy staffs finding him at last, hit savagely on all sides at once, the thickset man in barbarian armor stag-

gered a few steps further from the protecting pillar. With a jointless look of unconsciousness and broken bones he pitched headlong in Grant's direction.

Grant broke out of his frozen trance and began to back off, still staring, feeling his way by grip on the splintery boards of the table behind him. Staffs rose and fell over the thing on the floor and daggers flashed, and he was thankful that the triumphant howling drowned out some of its sound. This might be a nightmare, but death in this nightmare was as real as any butchery.

The howl died and men mumbling and cursing and nursing bruises and wounds began to look around. Grant still sidled slowly backward, depending on their attention being held by the dead thing on the floor, while one of the triumphant attackers bent over it, and pried loose the sword from a dead hand. As he raised it toward the ceiling in a triumphant drunken arc, his eyes found Grant and saw him moving. Being seen by one of these creatures of a nightmare was carrying nightmare too far. Grant froze between the instinct to turn and run and the hope of being ignored.

A snaggle-toothed grin split the face of the man who had seen him. "*Kill the blasphemer!*"

He put a foot on a bench and leaning over the table separating them and swung at Grant with a clumsy two-handed blow. "*Blood for N'tigh'ta!*"

Grant moved sidewise because he could not go back. The sword sank three inches into the next table behind him, revealing at this close inspection a huge bloody length and a heaviness that was more like an extended ax blade, a terrible weapon that could split a man in half. As the other struggled to free it, Grant leaped around the end of the table and ran, feeling as if he moved on leaden legs. Shouts and howls sounded behind him. He ran toward one end of the room where it was darker. A human figure was dimly visible, and something beyond him that might be a door. A few more strides and, straining his eyes, Grant saw a wide, closed door. He could also see that the man who stood in front of it was raising an ax, waiting for him, grinning.

Grant stopped. He stopped the easy way, by running into a table. There were howls behind him, coming closer, but near him was a ladder, leaning against one of the foot-square rafters that held up the roof. It took half a second to reach it. He pulled himself weakly up the rungs and onto a transverse beam,

then turned and kicked the ladder into the faces of the screaming mob below.

For a moment he felt safe. There weren't as many down there as he had thought; the main crowd seemed to be howling elsewhere in the building after another victim. Nevertheless, four men below him still seemed interested in him. They glared up with their ragged hair in their eyes, and shouted curses about the stain that had to be washed from N'tigh'ta, whatever that was. Those who had staves struck at his legs. Their aim was drunken and missed him, but the grinning lout with the sword was heaving its monstrous length into the air again, and another one had picked up a stool. A staff struck Grant a painful blow on the ankle and he saw he could not stay where he was. He did something he would never have had courage to do an hour earlier. He released his clutch on the vertical pillar and turned and ran along the beam he stood on. It was less than a foot wide and uneven. Under other circumstances he would have fallen off, but to fall now meant death, so he managed to stay on, although every successful step was a constant astonishment to him. Half-running, Grant staggered the last ten feet and collapsed panting

against a central pillar. From this vantage point he had a wide view of the barnlike place.

A small group of the fur-pants were struggling with the ladder that he had kicked down, attempting to right it and follow him. Three blowsy looking women and a fat man were huddling in a gigantic fireplace against the far wall. But below Grant's feet was the center of the noise.

The whole howling mob that had downed the other soldier, and twice as many besides, seemed to be pressing in around another swordsman with his back toward the pillar Grant was clutching. Massive shoulders and thick arms encased in seemingly inadequate coverings of scarred red leather armor swung in and out with a long sword that seemed from Grant's vantage to be even more huge than the terrible weapon that had missed him a few minutes earlier. A heavy barbed mace in the big swordsman's left hand made abrupt occasional swings that contacted encroaching staves, daggers or arms with an equal sounding thud and smash, leaving nothing that it touched unbroken.

The athletic energy of the other big soldier had been phenomenal, but as Grant looked down on the glittering, weaving sweep of sword he saw a skill

that smoothed away effort and wove a web of steel around the swordsman. The man combined parries and slashes into one unfaltering swing that curved back along its deadly course without ever stopping or slowing when it sliced through wood and flesh and bone, its deadly force not in any separate surge of the arm that swung it, but in the whispering speed of the heavy blade. It was as smooth and dangerous as the singing circle of a propeller, and the mob feared it.

Snarling with drunken fury, they still stayed back from the circle and tried blows at long range, or threw daggers and knives that rang against metal and were smashed aside before reaching the soldier.

Not all of them had been cautious; red-throated and split-skulled corpses lay within the circle and men dragged themselves apart from the crowd, groaning and nursing broken arms. One was being helped by another to wrap up a bleeding, handless stump.

The soldier sang and shouted as he swung his sword, a wordless chant that fitted the dance of its glittering edge. As Grant watched, he stepped out, grunted with an extra surge and swayed forward in a balanced half step that reached the blood-wet tip of the sword a foot further in

its circuit and was rewarded by three separate shrieks from three directions. The encircling mob crowded back, cursing and striking each other in their haste, and resumed formation at a more respectful distance, leaving another of their number on the floor curled up around a half severed arm, trying to staunch the red life that pumped from it, dying and not worth the extra stroke that would kill him.

The big soldier was holding his own, but he could not hold that webwork of steel and speed around him forever. He was panting in his chant. Already the crowd had circled behind the pillar. One slip, one falter, and a concerted rush from all sides would overwhelm him.

Grant found he regretted it. Such skill and delight as the big soldier showed in his bloody work was a kind of art and deserved life. Then he realized that when the soldier went, it would be his turn. It was only the singing circle of the soldier's blade that cleared space where the crowd could not swarm under his beam and batter him down. When the soldier died, Grant would go, too.

Grant clutched at the smoke-blackened wood as a surge of nausea tore at his bowels. What was he doing in this impossible place? Had he been struck by a

car and was this all just a feverish dream?

As if to answer, a hurtling bottle crashed against his chest. The blow and the jagged tear in his vest were real, as well as the ache in his ankle where a staff had struck him. He reached a sick certainty that even if this *were* a dream, it would be safer to treat it as hard, merciless fact. There seemed to be a good chance that his death here would be as final as any he would ever have.

The ladder was finally propped against the further end of the beam and the men below were pushing and scrambling to see who would be first up it. Fur-pants with the sword climbed up three rungs, only to be hit in the back of the neck by fur-pants with the stool. As he dropped off, the one with the stool scrambled up, followed closely by the five or six others. Weaving, but keeping their feet easily, they ran along the beam toward Grant.

The one with the stool stopped at a good range and swung the stool back over his head for a skull-crushing blow. The ones behind were not ready for that sudden stop and pushed into him, pushing him closer, and at the same instant, Grant realized that he needed a weapon. Taking advantage of the stool-man's un-

balance and hesitation, Grant leaned forward and gripped a leg of the stool and yanked. His yank had force because he kept ahold on the central pillar with his other arm, but fur-pants with the stool had a strong grip on the other legs, and was too befuddled to let go. He was yanked off his feet. With a hoarse shout of anger, the man dove down into the soldier's private battleground of clear floor below; badly entangled with the stool, he landed and had his throat neatly slit by a casual side sweep of the whispering sword.

The big soldier looked up, thinking he was being attacked from above. His face split in an immense grin as he saw Grant facing a line of attacking men.

"Oho! A friend." He paused, completing another swing around the circle below that was answered with one pained curse, and shifted his position a little, glancing back up at Grant. "And just in time, too!"

In the natural course of some pattern he was weaving, as though without his effort, the sword extended its range in a backhand curve and licked up over the edge of the beam, cutting the ankles from under the first two men; they tottered, ankle tendons severed, tripping on their limp dangling feet, and

fell into the mob. The next man tried to retreat, but only succeeded in unbalancing the unsteady file behind him. As they began to topple off they added to the confusion below, and for a moment the mob drew back, thinking it was being attacked by enemies from above.

The soldier stuck his blood-encrusted mace into a loop on his belt while he drove the circle further back with savage advances and then made a rush to the pillar, as though to clear away the few lurking behind it. There was only one, who leaped backward and tumbled over a bench. In the shadow behind the pillar, where it would not be immediately clear to the mob what he was doing, the soldier laughed and stuck a free hand up to Grant.

"Come on, mate, give us a lift up and we'll soon be out of here."

It was the first friendly word Grant had heard among what had seemed a million howls of hate and murder, and suddenly everything seemed more sane and matter of fact, like the friendly commonsense tone of the soldier. Rapidly but without hysteria, Grant knelt on the beam, locked his right arm around the vertical pillar, and extended his left down to be

grasped. He felt a callused hand grip his.

As the soldier pulled himself up, Grant thought his arm would be wrenched apart at every joint. He bit down on a scream of pain. Still gripping his sword, the big man hooked its hilt over the beam and pulled himself the rest of the way up. He came up smoothly, but most of his weight had been on Grant's arm, and the man was even bigger and thicker with muscle than he had looked from below. At least three hundred pounds of man and equipment had heaved himself up on the tensile strength of one thin, slightly undernourished arm.

Ignoring a clatter of bottles, daggers and small objects that sailed past, the soldier was sheathing his sword and peering into the darkness at the end of the room. He stepped onto the right-angle beam without a glance at Grant, and began to move toward the rear wall. Grant went after him, rubbing his aching arm, but oddly pleased because this time he walked on a narrow beam without a tremor.

As they walked, the roof slanted down closer until Grant could see a low clerestory with sealed windows facing them; above that the smoke-blackened roof angled up into the shad-

ows. The soldier rapped the wall with his pommel and looked satisfied, as though he had found a way out.

Gesturing to Grant to crowd in close, the soldier pointed to the wall, which was hung with shapes like pairs of full sacks and things that looked like festoons of dried weeds.

There was a rancid foodlike smell in the air and Grant realized that the noxious looking things were probably cured meat and herbs. The soldier unhooked two linked hams and draped them over Grant's shoulders. They were massive, pulling him down with a staggering weight for which he was unprepared, seeing them handled so lightly. Grant found himself over the edge and falling, and was brought back onto the beam by a lightning grip and heave of the soldier.

The man grunted a derogatory remark to himself, and then laughed, braced his hands against an overhead timber and began kicking boards out of the side of the building.

For a moment Grant doubted his eyes; the soldier was husky and big, but even a superman should not put holes in a building with a few kicks. Yet the soldier continued to kick, loosening and dispatching another board. Grant had learned about

crooked contractors substituting flimsy workmanship in his studies of architecture. The thunk of the boards under the soldier's kicks was not the sound of seasoned timber. As the second kicked board leaned outward and vanished, Grant decided that the sidewalls had probably been fastened on with old chewing gum or something of equal strength, and dismissed the problem. A deeper darkness showed where the boards had been and icy air and snowflakes swirled in instead of the spring sunshine he had vaguely expected. The big man at the opening hardly hesitated for a deep breath before crouching at the edge and leaping out of sight.

Grant, balancing groggily on the beam, looked at the darkness outside. It was not inviting. His moment of indecision ended as a pole reached up and cracked his shin. To stay would be to condemn himself to a peculiarly undignified and butcherish kind of death at the hands of a particularly bestial mob. Other forms of death were to be preferred. He shuffled to the edge and tottered there.

Clutching his hams, he made a hampered attempt to crouch at the edge and leap outwards as the big swordsman had done. He tried and toppled through into frigid, snow filled darkness.

III

The snow outside had drifted and banked high against the building wall. Grant sank into it and floundered helplessly until his head came above the surface.

He could not remember ever having been so uncomfortable before. His body was bruised and sore, the hams hung like a dead weight around his neck, melted snow was soaking into his clothes, and the air, when he came up and encountered it, was icy and filled with flying particles that stung against his face.

His surroundings were completely invisible, a black wilderness of cold. A shout reached him from somewhere ahead and Grant floundered toward the sound to a place where the drifts were only waist high and the wind cut through his thin dress suit like an icy lash. A few yards on he found what appeared to be a path where other bodies had floundered before him and lowered the snow a little. He jumped as a hand clutched him out of the darkness.

"Follow me, mate—and don't lose those hams or I'll tear out your skinny throat." The soldier moved off, ploughing a shallow channel in the deep snow, and Grant floundered after him.

His shoes were pointed, black,

shiny and expensive—or had been when he had last seen them. He couldn't see them now, but he could feel them. They were fine for dancing or getting married in, but they were worse than useless for walking in the snow. Soaked and soggy, they squished with every step. Grant shoved through the clutching drifts and felt sorry for himself.

He had thought of asking the trudging form ahead to stop and let him rest, but he had the horrible thought miles back that if he stopped he would freeze to death. This was the only thing that enabled him to put one numbed foot in front of the other. He had followed the swordsman, expecting him momentarily to arrive at a house or some warm place; it would be impossible that the man was content to plough through endless hellish snow. But he had long ago given up thinking about when they would arrive at the warm place, or where they were going, and just stumbled after the moving man ahead, as if he were warmth itself, always retreating, always out of reach.

The darkness was passing and the sky was brightening—showing the wastes of snow around him. Even light seemed to hurt with the bitter numbness of nerves that were almost frozen.

In the growing light he saw

small trees on either side. They thickened until the men were threading in and around large trees in a woods thick enough to stop the biting wind and allow only a thin layer of snow to cover its floor. Grant followed the man in barbarian armor over the clearer ground, his mind awakening and beginning to ask unanswerable questions, until they emerged from the trees into the cold and the drifting deep snow again.

Closing his eyes against the bite of wind, Grant tried to stop sensation and thought. They ploughed across a rutted path that might have been a road under the snow, and then down a slope with trees, the soldier going faster, and Grant keeping up because it was easier to stagger downhill. The wind got behind and hurried him, putting knives of cold into his back.

Down in a hollow ahead, sheltered from the wind, a small campfire flickered. Grant's first realization that they had reached their journey's end was when a hoarse voice called out . . .

"Hold there! Who is it?" There was the quick rasp of a sword being slipped from the scabbard.

"Aker Amen and some hams—make room by the fire, you lazy sons!"

The soldier pushed up to the

blaze, with Grant tottering eagerly after him. Before he could reach its beckoning warmth, the man with the sword jumped forward and clutched him by the shirt front.

"Aker, this isn't Bigeln! What happened to him—and who is this wreck with the meat neck-lace?"

Aker Amen toasted his wet feet and frowned into the fire. "Bigeln was a fool and now he's dead. I would be too, except that this stranger came along and we managed to get out of that filthy spowl's nest together. Let him be."

The swordsman let go of Grant's coat. Since this was the only thing holding him up, Grant collapsed in a limp heap. One of the hams plopped into the mud next to Aker Amen, who produced a dagger from his belt and calmly sawed himself off a piece of meat. He chewed the tough flesh and ruminated. He must have been thinking of the battle because he made a disgusted noise and shook his dagger at the swordsman.

"Put that sticker away, Grayf, and let me tell what a fool that Bigeln was. We were in this drinking hall finishing three or four small bottles. The townsmen are dirty, ugly and stupid—more animals than men. The only thing they care about is

their stinking little god, N'tigh'ta. He's an ugly little monster with a big belly and a hollow head—they put sacrifices and such in this scooped-out top of his head. They have little idols everywhere; it's about all you can do to avoid stepping on them."

Grant groaned as he turned his other side toward the flame.

"Well, we're sitting there drinking. That stupid Bigeln should have known better—he's been in this place before. But you know what he does? He's chewing weed, and before I can stop him, he rolls a great gob around on his tongue and lets fly."

Grayf, the other soldier, let his jaw drop with amazement.

"No!"

"Yes!" Aker roared the word out. "He thought the idol was a nice fancy little cuspidor. He spits in it, and those fur-pants' spowls let out a shout you can hear ten miles away. The next second we have our swords out and are fighting the whole damn town. They got Bigeln and I got out."

"But what about *this*?" Grayf jerked his thumb at Grant's collapsed form. "What are you going to do with him?"

Aker cut another slice of meat. "Not going to do anything with him. He was just standing

around, so I brought him along to carry those hams. I wanted to keep my sword arm free. Fact is, I don't even know who he is." He jabbed a giant thumb about three inches into Grant's ribs. "Hey—who are you?"

Grant opened one bleary eye and tried to gather together his foggy thoughts.

"M'name's Grant O'Reilly and I'm a student at Columbia. I was just—just standing—when . . ." He bogged down at the attempt to describe what had happened to him and his head dropped back onto his chest.

A pimple-faced boy of about sixteen, who had been keeping in the background, leaped forward, shouting at the same time.

"You heard him! He said he's a student—student magician, that's what! I'll cut his throat and drink his blood and take his clothes and—" He grabbed a handful of Grant's hair and snapped his head back, starting to draw a battered dagger across Grant's throat.

Aker shifted his weight and kicked the boy into a snowdrift.

"You take orders from me and that's all you do. You do the carrying and the cooking and leave him alone. Even if he is a student, he can fight, which is more than you can do." The boy drew back, sniffeling and rubbing his hip, and threw a look

of black malevolency at Grant.

Grant ignored him because he was already drifting into sleep.

IV

During the night, the flight and battle with the mob recurred in fragments of dream that wove in with what he had heard Aker Amen say; and slowly, penetrating ever deeper, with a chill like the cold beyond the fire, came the realization that these men spoke and lived as if their way of life was the only one—as if they had never heard of any other. Wherever his world of money, air-conditioned houses, of warm beds and swift automobiles and police and ambulances to protect him had gone, it was gone so unreachably far that Aker Amen and Grayf and the snarling ones in the tavern had never encountered it, never heard of it. However he had arrived here, he was a long way from home. There would be no easy road back.

Slowly through the night, the reality of memories of civilization and comfort and the hopes of rescue faded until they seemed mere fantasies of a world that had never been.

* The boy poured water on the fire, and the hissing and steam woke Grant from his soggy sleep.

It was snowing again.

He felt mauled. His muscles ached terribly and were so stiff he could scarcely move. His back, which faced away from the fire, was numb with cold; his feet were soaked and his nose was running. He sat huddled beside the smoking ruin of the fire and tried to pull his ragged thoughts together. Perhaps he was in Alaska or some savage corner of Greenland. That was a possibility.

With his arms clasped around his legs and his chin resting on his knees, he was forced to stare at the tattered remains of his dress shoes. They focused his attention, because they were more than shoes. They were symbolic. The shoes were Grant. A well-constructed, civilized product, perfectly in tune with a well-ordered world. Now a period of darkness and a night of madness, and that world was gone. Security and comfort vanished with it. All that remained of the shoes was a torn, bruised cover with a bit of blue flesh peeping through—his flesh. He rubbed his dripping nose on his coat sleeve and snuffled in self pity.

It was still snowing, white flakes falling out of the gray lead sky into a silent world. The only thing he could hear was the soft sibilance of falling snow. Grant sat up suddenly, the little

drifts of snow falling from his back.

The significance of the doused fire penetrated. He was alone.

He forgot the soreness and fatigue of his body now—it was a matter of survival again. Slipping in the slushy soup around the fire, he tottered to his feet. The clearing was empty. He screamed at the top of his lungs, his voice cracking with terror.

"Akerrrr . . ! Aker Amen! Helloooo ! ! "

It was like shouting into a sea of drifting feathers, and produced as much result. He lurched around the clearing and noticed a track leading off through the trees. The footprints were fresh, but the windblown drifts were already beginning to fill them in. Grant followed them; it was his only chance for survival in this icebound wilderness. Aker would help him—*had* to help him. He realized for the first time how completely incapable he was. Without some help he would be dead by nightfall.

He pushed through the woods, stumbling over concealed obstacles and falling headlong in the drifts. As he came down a slight rise, he found himself on the same road-like track he had crossed on the way in. Three dimly-seen figures were just starting up the bank on the far

side. At his shout, they stopped and he rushed up to Aker, who was breaking trail.

"You can't leave—you can't leave without me! You've got to take me with you!"

Aker Amen adjusted his sword belt and fixed Grant with a cold, indifferent gaze.

"Why?"

Grant gaped twice, but couldn't think of what to say. There were no answers to the devastating question. Why should they help him? He realized instinctively that a plea of "humanity" or "friendship" would be worthless, as well as out of place. This society wasn't built like that. With the speed of desperation, his mind raced to other possibilities. Convenience, help? He knew that he didn't dare offer fighting assistance; last night had shown how woefully lacking he was in that important commodity. He could think of no other talents that might interest them. For the first time in his twenty-five years of existence he would have liked to reverse his civilized attributes and have a strong back and a weak mind.

Weak as his back was, though, it might be useful to them.

"I can carry your things, your equipment or whatever. . . ." Grant stopped suddenly as he realized that Aker and Grayf

had, besides their weapons, only large leather wallets slung from their belts. His unspoken question was answered by a jerk of Aker's thumb.

Grant had been in such a panic when he passed the boy that he hadn't realized what he was carrying. He saw it now; a gigantic pack, hung with pots, sacks, and bundles and crowned with one of the stolen hams. The weight of this monster load had forced the boy to the ground as soon as the group stopped. He sat on a hummock in the road now, breathing heavily and greeting Grant with a malevolent stare.

That job was taken care of, too.

Aker Amen had turned back to resume the trail, but he stopped suddenly, his head cocked to one side. At the same instant Grant was aware of a distant rumbling, like muffled drums.

"Horses coming! Into the woods!" Even as he shouted the words, Aker was diving into the underbrush. Grant was too startled to act, but Grayf was galvanized into instant action. Grant was between him and the safety of the trees, a fact that made little difference to Grayf. He scarcely slowed when his shoulder hit Grant; then he was among the trees and Grant lay

sprawled helplessly in a deep snowdrift.

The boy was still struggling to his feet when the horse-women came. Grant had just a fleeting glimpse of them—long, flowing blonde hair and gilt breastplates—as they swept down the road. One of them uttered a coarse cry as they passed. She leaned far out of the saddle and made one sweeping stroke with her sword. The boy stumbled and fell to the ground. The ham, loosed by the fall, flew in one direction; the boy's head bounced in another. A thick stream of blood gushed from the dismembered neck and stained the snow a deep red.

The two soldiers reappeared at the edge of the road and hurled blistering oaths after the horses. Clear, girlish laughter floated back and they cursed the louder. Grant pulled himself from the chill embrace of the drift and tried to brush off most of the snow before it melted.

"You there—Grant O'Reilly! Still want to come along? We need a boy to carry our duffel."

Aker and Grayf howled with laughter and pounded each other on the back. Grant couldn't quite see the joke, and considered it to be in the worst taste possible. He found it hard, however, to stifle his own feeling of happiness and relief. The boy's

death, untimely though it had been for the lad, might provide Grant's one chance of survival.

He pulled the packstraps from the limp form and tried to ignore the accusing stare of the bodiless head. He would have taken the pack and left, if Aker hadn't reminded him that survival was still the most important factor in this brutal world.

"Might as well take his clothes. Unless you have to wear those things you've got on."

Grant swallowed squeamishness and took the advice, while Aker Amen and Grayf waited, lounging against a tree and making remarks. The falling snow thinned and stopped as Grant stripped the boy's gray body, unpeeling layers of unsewn fur and belts and bands of leather that held the fur in place, and wrappings of filthy cloth which he dropped on the snow after he observed black specks of fleas hopping off.

Aker Amen shifted his weight with an impatient creak of leather. "Make it fast."

Grant could not grasp the intricacies of the boy's wrappings, but one large cowhide was slit in the center like a poncho, and when he slid his head through the hole and belted the hide around the waist with a leather strip from which dangled the boy's dagger, it was a neat,

respectable tunic, and the thickness of the leather shut off the cold blasts of the wind. A sudden itch indicated the leather had other tenants, but just then he did not care.

Hastily, already feeling better, Grant sat down in the snow and ripped the soggy shoes off his blue feet, hissing between his teeth at the needling pangs they gave forth at every touch, and shoved them into the lumbering boots of the boy with a grunt that barely restrained desperate profanity.

The boots were warm and oddly soft inside and crackled when he stood up in them. He realized that they were mukluks, soft leather boots stuffed with hay. The Eskimos used them, he knew; his feet should be comfortable, though now they felt as if all the imps of hell were applying red hot needles.

Bits and pieces of leather in various odd shapes were stacked beside the corpse in the snow. Grant looked them over uncertainly, draped one piece around his neck like a scarf and took a piece that was wide in the middle and thin on the ends and tied it over his head and under his chin. Judging by Aker's and Grayf's sudden roar of laughter, that was not the use for which the item was intended, but it kept the wind from his

ears. Aker straightened, ready to go, and Grant abandoned the rest of the inexplicable odds and ends of leather and left them scattered beside the naked, headless body as he went to pick up the pack.

It was too heavy to get off the ground, but its shoulder straps stood out stiffly, as if suggesting a solution. He half knelt and slipped his arms through and then pulled himself hand over hand up a sapling until he was almost upright and had his legs under him enough to take his weight.

It was a neat bit of commonplace practical thinking which he would not have been capable of a freezing half hour ago. He was still cold, but he could move and think; his mind was no longer congealed with cold and already the exertion was beginning to warm him. He looked around for approval, but Aker and Grayf had vanished into the silent, snow-filled wood, leaving a double trail of footprints.

Stumbling under the unwieldy load, but moving ahead steadily, he followed the trail of the footprints, occasionally hearing the murmur of a voice ahead.

He was secure, with a place and a job and protectors. As he trudged, the exertion warmed him. His feet stopped flaming

with thawing pains and began to feel like feet again. Without the counter-irritant of other aches for the first time, his attention was drawn to a hollow sensation in his stomach and he realized that he was hungry. As he walked he reached back with the dagger and hacked off slices of ham and stuffed them between his teeth. It was delicious in his salivating mouth; and once down, it glowed in his stomach, sending messages of nourishment and cheer through his blood. He ate enormously, although in a less hungry state he would have found the ham inedible. This time he had skipped three meals and had undergone more exertion than ever in any comparable period of his life. The badly smoked ham tasted like the best food he had ever eaten.

He was puzzled. By all that he knew about himself and his state of health, he should be feeling sick, or be dead, not feeling this unexpected exhilarated pleasure at the simple fact of eating; nor should he be enjoying the dazzling whiteness of snow in spite of the cumbersome weight of the pack he lugged. He had been told that he was weakly, that he should avoid exertion and excitement, yet he had the thought that no one who was weak could

have picked up the monstrous pack at all. He had lifted it because he had to carry it or die, and every step was a new and conscious effort, but the strain was probably the effort to force lazy surprised muscles to do the job they had been intended to do, and the pangs were pangs of disuse.

Why had he ever believed he was an invalid?

Because his mother had told him, and because he had those fits of immobility.

Slipping and catching at bushes, he followed the trail of footprints as they wandered down an embankment and struck left along a dry creek bed at the bottom.

The floor of the creek bed was a nightmare for a novice woodsman. There were hidden tree roots to catch his feet and snow-laden branches to catch at his face and dump their burden of snow on his head. As he went on, he reviewed the passages in Cooper where the hunter went silently and skillfully through the forest, and remembered how he had envied and wished he could do it too. If he had followed his inclinations, he might have been as soft footed as an Indian, as magnificently muscled as Aker Amen, not a clumsy beginner.

His smooth-soled mukluks

slipped on a downslopes in the stream bed and he sprawled ignominiously on his back, and had to scabble for holds to pull himself upright, losing many minutes before he could hurry on. Grant O'Reilly took the falls and bruises without the concern that had always made him fear mortal damage to his health—a bitter anger against his unused, pampered body kept him driving on. He would overtake Aker Amen and Grayf and show them he was no laggard.

But they remained elusive, although sometimes he heard their voices ahead. Hours passed, and as he went on, he remembered the coddling care his mother had given him, her warnings to avoid excitement, to stay away from the other children. Why had he believed her?

Because of the fits, the moments of dizziness and immobility. Yet now, when his muscles ran with liquid flame, when he had never exerted himself so much for so long in his life, he was not sick. Yesterday he had been closer to death and more legitimately frightened than at any time in his life, and yet he had had no fits and had not been sick. As a matter of fact, he felt more wide awake and his senses were sharper now than at any time he could remember. Then what had given

him fits and dizziness, if not this kind of thing?

Half skidding, half sliding down another short drop in the stream bed, Grant braced his hand against the bank and fell sidewise as his hand went through into a snow covered bush which had looked like solid earth. For a moment, in the sudden sheltering dark, he lay limp and thought of something that might be an answer. Excitement without any exertion was notoriously unhealthy, a source of ulcers to business men. And a child needed activity more desperately than an adult. Inaction, then, had made him sick. His mother's coddling had made him sick!

Anger drove him, and he clawed his way out of the bush and staggered out into the bright snowy day, to follow the footprints of the eternally elusive Aker and Grayf, grinding his teeth. He would show his mother, he would be a savage, like these savages, and not the puny, effete fool she had tried to make of him.

The soldiers held him in too much contempt to walk with him, he thought bitterly. They could tell he was following anyhow; probably the thumps and crashes of his blundering could be heard for miles. They did not know he had been deprived of

his birthright, that he could have been as good a man as either of them, if he had been given a chance.

The sound of a branch cracking ahead and a murmur of voices encouraged him to totter forward at a more rapid rate. If only he could catch up, he might be able to ask them to stop for a short rest. He scrambled up a short embankment from the dry stream that they had been following and found the broken branch when he reached for the last hand hold. There was no one there when he reached the top—only footprints which circled as if in doubt or discussion and then started off in a line again.

Grant followed, and the woods thinned and the ground grew more level. He could go faster now without tripping. He found himself stumbling across a large clearing and looked up from the trail of footprints just in time to see the two soldiers disappearing into the forest on the far side. He tried to make a cheerful shout, but the most noise he could muster was a faint croak.

But his voice was heard. He was answered from the woods behind his back by a rumbling cough that raised the short hairs on the nape of his neck!

There was terror in the sound, and a bestial strength that made

him sick at heart. No animal he knew could make that sound and he had no desire to get better acquainted. He moved across the clearing as fast as he could. There was a crashing from the thicket he had left. His pace increased.

Halfway across the clearing he tried to look over his shoulder—and tripped. He sprawled in the snow. He could summon no strength to rise, even when the beast broke out of the woods.

At his first glance, it reminded him of a black kangaroo, but outside of the powerful rear legs there was little resemblance. The front legs were short and thick, ending in curved, white talons. The beast's head was long and wolfish, the ears tufted like a lynx's, and very mobile. They twitched in all directions until they suddenly centered on Grant. The animal coughed again and then showed double rows of pointed teeth and charged.

Grant struggled to free his dagger as the beast bounded across the snow. He pulled it free of his belt but had no idea of how to use it on a brute each of whose paws held claws as long as his blade.

The black-furred legs sank into the snow six feet from where he lay. They contracted for a last leap. Grant could see the tiny green eyes, the saliva

that speckled the black fur beneath the teeth.

There was a sudden *thunk*, the clean sound of an axe biting deep into a tree, and a feathered shaft appeared between the eyes. The legs jerked once and the great body flopped sideways, the black bulk half sinking into the white snow.

Grant looked dazedly at the lusterless eyes with the red arrow projecting between them. He looked quickly around. The forest was as quiet and apparently as empty of life as it had been all day. He shook once—and then again in an uncontrollable spasm. In the brief respite from walking, exhaustion had finally caught up with him and the delayed terror of death reached through his tired mind a second later. The woods were full of unseen black monstrosities and arrows of secret death.

He fought to his feet, struggling against the weight of the pack as if it were heavy paws on his shoulders and fled, screaming and staggering headlong through the forest. He would have run until he crashed into a tree if a strong arm had not stopped him.

Grant tried to struggle from the clutch, howling with terror, and at last freed himself of the pack. He did not feel the blow

across his face—but he was sitting on the ground, the red mist clearing from before his eyes.

Then he saw that Aker Amen stood over him, and knew that he was safe. His body, racked by over-exhaustion, shook uncontrollably.

Aker Amen glowered down, and gauged Grant's buttocks with a not-too-gentle toe. "Now what's all the noise about? You hollered enough to be heard from here to the Crying Mountains."

"An animal," Grant stammered between deep gasps for breath. "Strange animal, black, big and black, with claws and long hind legs. It was going to—"

The description obviously meant something to Aker. He half drew his sword and peered into the thickets under the trees. "Damn the miserable luck! We've got a Berl-Cat on our trail. He must be right behind you."

Grant went white again and hastened to dismiss the idea. "No, the arrow took care of him, a perfect shot. But I couldn't see where it came from. That was the trouble." He was leaning on the ground, relaxing and letting his spine uncurl from the punishment of the pack load, quite sure that Aker Amen was woodsman enough to prevent any mysteries from creeping up on them. He was resting his eyes on

Aker Amen's leather-wrapped feet as he talked, and he saw them suddenly stiffen motionless. It was an odd impression to get from feet.

Aker's voice reached his ears in a whisper. "What color was the arrow?"

"Red."

Grant looked up and saw sweat suddenly shining on the big soldier's forehead.

With a very slow, steady motion, his arms trembling with a barely perceptible tremor, Aker Amen put his left hand to his sword hilt and finished drawing it from its sheath.

"We have come in peace and we go in peace!" His voice was loud and falsely calm, and he seemed to be addressing the trees of the forest. "We love the holy men of Al'kahar, and desire to share the test of power."

Holding his sword dangling lightly from his fingertips, Aker pushed it carefully through the snow into the ground until it stood unsupported. He stepped away from it with a courteous gesture and hissed at Grant between his teeth. "Get up, you outland idiot! Slowly. Look *polite* and put your dagger in the snow."

Following instructions occupied Grant's attention. When he looked up, he saw the men

coming out from between the trees. . . .

They were coming from all directions. Men in black robes, their heads covered by cowls. Each man had a long red bow across his back and a handful of crimson arrows in his waistband. They crossed the snow as silently as falling leaves.

Their faces were the faces of the dead, gray and bloodless, with eyes that glimmered in the dark caverns of their eyesockets.

Grant tried to make out the expression in the eyes but if there had ever been a soul behind those eyes, that soul had died and rotted and dried up many years ago. It was like trying to look into the expression of a mummy.

Aker Amen's steady voice was like unexpected sanity in a bad dream. "I will give myself to the test of arm, and my companion will give himself to the test of . . ." He delayed and swept Grant with a contemptuous glance and muttered, "What in hell can you do? Sword, dagger, mace, bow . . . ?"

Grant recalled that he had one talent which might be of value in this primitive place. He had taken archery, classified as a low exertion sport, for his required gymnasium credits in college. He heard his own voice, thin and hesitant.

"I think I could use one of those bows, if . . ."

Aker spoke loudly. "My companion will give himself to the test of eye. Who will test me?"

There was still no reply, but a black-robed figure, taller than the others, stepped forward and divested himself of arrows and bows. He pushed his hood back, revealing an expressionless head, as hairless, smooth and unhuman as a statue's head, with eyes no more alive than stone eyes.

Watching the man, Aker stripped off his weapons and armor and dropped them in the snow, leaving himself lightly clad and younger and more supple in proportions of shoulders to belly than Grant would have thought. Grant was again suddenly shamed with the realization that Aker was almost as young as he, for all his manly skills. The soldier stretched his muscles and arched his fingers, scanning his opponent, and estimating.

The others did not speak, even to murmur among themselves. The trees held the hush of snow-filled woods, and somewhere there was the susurrant of an overlaid fir branch bending and releasing its white burden to the snow covered ground.

The two men leaned forward imperceptibly; then like an uncoiling snake, in a blur of speed, the tall one in the dark cloak

leaped forward with his spread fingers jabbing to Aker's face. With equal speed, Aker slapped the hand aside before it reached him, as if slapping aside an insect, and countered with an underhand swing of a balled fist. But the tall one's jab had been a feint and it was matched by a simultaneous low jab from the other hand. It might have killed a lesser man. Aker reacted with a startled grunt, and his first blow wavered off center, glanced off the other's ribs and spun the tall one away from him. The exchange of blows and jabs was short and fierce; it ended when the other hooked one of Aker's legs from beneath him. As Aker fell, he grabbed the other to him like a cat, twisted in midair and landed heavily with his opponent beneath him.

The robed stranger struggled to his feet with Aker on his back. They fell again, their feet kicked up streamers of snow, and again the tall one's tendoned hands crept over Aker's shoulders to seek his eyes. Aker buried his face against the other's back, muffling his eyes in the folds of the hood, and shifted position subtly. The muscles of his arms sprang up in clear relief and his tunic began to split across the shoulders.

For a moment they lay still,

locked in ultimate effort, both of them so covered with snow as to be white sculpted marble; then a sudden small noise shot the length of the clearing, the sound of a dry branch cracking. Breathing heavily Aker climbed to his feet and left his opponent lying limp with a broken spine.

Grant glanced around apprehensively, but the watchers remained impassive, without grief or vengeance for their dead companion.

Abruptly a bow and six arrows were shoved into Grant's hand. He looked at them stupidly until he heard Aker Amen's fierce whisper. "Shoot, you fool! Hit some small target. Their man will have to match the shot."

With a heavy pounding in his heart, Grant set five of the arrows into his belt and nocked one onto his bowstring. The bow was heavier than the ones he was used to, and had a different feel. He would have liked to have had a few trial shots first, but knew that would be impossible. His hands were still trembling, but he hoped they would steady on the pull. Glancing around the clearing he saw a scar on a tall, oaklike tree. It was white against the dark trunk and should make an easy mark.

The bow had a very heavy pull. With great labor Grant

drew the arrow back its full length and let fly. He almost gasped with horror as he saw it was a full six feet wide of the mark.

The arrow continued, arched downward, and struck a tree ten yards further on, impaling a sucker and pinning its single leaf to the bark. If that had been his mark, he would have considered it a good shot at an unusual distance.

The robed men had turned to follow the arrow's flight, and had not seen him wince at the miss. He tried to act smugly confident, in spite of the scowl and the fierce set of Aker's eyebrows. The soldier had been watching and was aware of Grant's inaptitude.

One of the dark figures moved next to Grant and pushed back his cowl. His hair had been shaved off and the pale skin was covered with small sores, even one with a tiny cut in the center. The sores were evenly spaced and, Grant realized with a shudder, undoubtedly self-inflicted.

The man wet his finger, tested wind direction, settled his feet, raised his bow, measured the distance and the mark a moment—then drew the string and released it in a single motion. The arrow was a scarlet blur against the leaden sky. It

arched upward and fell straight, hitting Grant's arrow and splitting a long sliver from it.

"Robin Hood," Grant tried to mutter sneeringly, but it did not succeed. Fear still clutched at his guts. Now the other would shoot first, and Grant follow, and he had very little faith in his ability to best a marksman as sure and steady as the man with the sores.

His opponent nocked another arrow to the string and stood relaxed as one of the robed men poked into a coppice of small bushes.

The arrows were slid from Grant's belt as he watched. Startled, he glanced aside to see Aker standing close, peering at the arrows with his head bent ostentatiously.

"I think you were given crooked arrows—let me look at them." He stooped more closely over the arrows and Grant had a momentary glimpse of a bright flash in his hand. Aker had one of the arrows hidden behind the others and was rubbing it with something that flashed. He whispered now, but Grant could catch the words.

"Sharp the point and keen the eye,

Hit the mark when off you fly."

He straightened up and handed the arrow to Grant.

"Here, this one looks to be the best."

When Grant examined the arrow, he started to smile. In his own crude way the barbarian was trying to help. Aker had scratched a little eye on the flat metal point of the arrowhead and muttered a spell over it! He had even daubed a little color onto it. Grant stared at the little green eye and it stared back.

Then it blinked slowly and looked away.

Grant jerked and almost dropped the arrow. He became aware, with growing horror, that the wood shaft was writhing gently in his hand. The point of the arrow was twitching back and forth. It reminded him of only one thing, a dog's nose twitching after a scent.

There was a swift whirring from the woods and Grant looked up, glad of the diversion. The beater had disturbed a covey of fat little birds and they flew up in a dun-colored cloud. Grant's opponent drew and shot with smooth speed, the red shaft hissing up. One of the birds was caught fair in the middle and tumbled down, impaled on the arrow. The men all looked to Grant.

He seemed to be watching himself also. He had the strange arrow nocked on the string and drawn back with no conscious

effort. He never had the slightest chance to aim before his fingers relaxed and the arrow plunged upwards.

It hit one bird and, curving slightly, penetrated another bird. The weight of the two hapless flyers dragged at it and the arrow turned a slight arc and fell back towards earth.

The next thing was a little too grandstand, Grant felt, too much like showing off. The arrow turned obviously and impaled a squirrel to the branch it had been scampering along. Grant rubbed his eyes to clear away what he was sure was a fault of vision. When he looked back, the scarlet arrow was still stuck in the branch with its load of three tiny bodies. He had won the test of power by a score of three to one.

When the whirr of the flushed birds had faded away in the shadows under the trees, silence returned to the forest. The silence lasted an instant and was replaced by a sound.

The cry of a wounded cat, the throbbing wail of a coyote, the trumpet of a bull elephant—these were the inhuman echoes of the sound, but there was more: the tone of sobbing, weeping, cursing, all the emotion-torn cries of sick mankind.

Heads back and mouths stretched wide as animals, the

black-robed men wailed. Grant sank to his knees before it and covered his eyes against the rain of arrows he felt sure was to follow.

The wail throbbed and sank. He dropped his cowardly arm. A few bushes shook and were still. The clearing was empty. The dead man had been carried away. The heavy beating of his heart and the bow and arrows tightly clutched in his white-knuckled hands were the only signs of the strangers' visit.

Aker Amen had also felt the terror of that last wail. He pulled his sword from the snow, and cursed eloquently as he wiped the blade dry. Grant walked to where he had dropped his pack and collapsed against it. Without interrupting his stream of invective, Aker aimed it at Grant.

"You misbegotten, worm-fingered, stew-brained, rock-headed civilian . . . if you hadn't made all that fuss with the Berl-Cat those Al'khar maniacs might never have heard us. Not only that, but with your lousy shooting I had to use up that good *climean* spell! Urrrh. . . ." The vituperation tapered off into a growl of anger as he buckled on his armor. As soon as all his equipment was secured, he started to leave, but turned to glare at Grant tugging tiredly

and half heartedly at the pack. "Rouse up and lean into that pack—we have to be out of these woods by sunset."

He did not say why, but Grant needed no urging. He had his fill of the things that lurked in this forest.

He lifted the hand clutching the bow and arrow, nodding questioningly at the encircling forest.

"Keep 'em," Aker growled. "You're supposed to have won them." He started moving again.

With a certain confidence at having a weapon at last, Grant unstrung the bow and shoved it and the arrows into a strap of the pack and shrugged the giant burden onto his shoulders. By the time Aker reached the edge of the clearing, Grant was a pace behind, settling the burden into position as he went.

Suddenly he was aware that Grayf was missing, and had been missing through the entire affair. Between shifts of the pack he wheezed, "Where's Grayf?"

"We were down the trail when I heard your noise. I came back. He should have gone ahead and waited." And Aker Amen added like a grim prayer, "If he went far enough away he'll be out of the way of *them*."

Five minutes later a turn of the trail gave them the answer. Grayf lay there face down, his

arms extended and his fingers hooked into the ground. He was like a monstrous pincushion full of monstrous red pins. From his back and legs there projected at least two dozen arrows.

"The fool must have tried to run." Aker passed the body in a wide circle, dragging Grant after him. "Don't go near him, or you'll look the same. The dead are sacred to the Al'kahar." He added in a fierce rumble, "That's what they eat."

As soon as they were out of sight of the riddled corpse Grant leaned against a tree and tried to lose his breakfast.

V

They continued the next hours at a slower pace. Aker grumbled and prodded Grant on with word and toe, but eventually gave up and adapted his long stride to that of the slower man, frequently ranging ahead silently to scout the trail.

At dusk they came to the end of the forest. The trees ended abruptly at the edge, a vertical escarpment, a granite wall with a thread of trail meandering down the face of it, widening out once into a green tree-grown shelf, then narrowing again. At the foot was a pleasant valley, with fields and meadows, and far away a smudge of smoke

rising from some kind of habitation.

As they went down the path they left the forest of the "holy men" of Al'kahar.

The path was less difficult than it had looked from above; it had been hand carved many ages ago, to judge from the weathering, but it was still usable and steps had been hacked out for the worst descents. The brisk wind swept the path free of snow. Grant concentrated on balancing his pack and staying away from the sheer drop on his left.

There was a shallow grotto where the trail leveled out half-way down, and the smoke-blackened wall and lumps of charcoal under the snow showed that travelers had stopped here before. As Grant groaned out of his pack, Aker ranged ahead onto the shelf with its overgrowth and the sound of wood being hacked rang back. The long sword had more than one use.

Now that they had stopped, Grant's hard-earned warmth seeped away. He hopped from one foot to another and blew on his numbed fingers.

Aker was back after a time with a load of dead branches. He stamped a clear spot at the base of the stone wall, where the stones before it would cut off the light of the fire, and

made a conical pile of broken sections of tree limb. Then he shredded a mound of splinters under them. From the depths of his wallet he dragged out a small metal box. Grant tried to guess what it contained—a fire bow, or perhaps flint and steel. He was taken aback when Aker shook a little orange lizard out into his hand. The lizard, sluggish from the cold, slowly drew the nictitating membrane from one eye. Obviously unhappy at the frigid world, it closed the membrane and tried to curl up. Aker stirred it to life with a blunt finger and proffered a few splinteds picked from the freshly cut wood. This unlikely food seemed to please the little reptile; its eyes flew open and it gulped the splinters down. It chewed voraciously when Aker produced some larger splinters about the size of toothpicks.

Grant was annoyed and cold. He couldn't see the connection between playing with the pet and starting the much needed fire. The lizard, finished with his dinner, began to curl up again and go back to sleep. Aker brought it close to the mound of splinters and squeezed its tail. The lizard gave him a protesting roll of its eyes and belched a small cloud of flame. Aker popped it back into its box and blew on the smouldering kindling.

Grant felt his mouth hanging open stupidly. In fairy tales he remembered mention of a creature something like this. The mythical lizard that lived on flame. "A salamander!" he murmured aloud.

"Yeah," Aker mumbled between blasts at the fire. "They come in real handy."

VI

The snow had stopped and the wind had fallen at sunset. The fire roared and sizzled and threw back a warm glow from the rock wall. Grant's stomach ground contentedly. He pulled a piece of gristle from between his teeth with a grimy forefinger, surprised he could actually be feeling so well. His body was exhausted, but he enjoyed the pleasure of relaxation after continued exertion. He took a long drag of sour wine from the musty animal-skin container.

He had the salamander box open and teased the little animal with a twig. The indignant lizard blew out a little cloud of red flame, but he jerked his fingers away in time. He fed it some tender splinters to soothe its ruffled feelings. It chewed the wood contentedly and let a little trickle of smoke out of its nostrils.

The tiny lizard symbolized all

his troubles. By the laws of reality it couldn't exist. Neither could these strange people with their impossible customs, nor the Berl-Cat, nor the spell that Aker had used on the arrow. Either he was insane and this world was all a part of his tortured mind; or, if he were sane, he had been transported here from his own world in some unthinkable manner. Wherever *here* was.

"Aker, what country is this?"

"Ter-Klosskrass, Independent Free State of the Tyrant Helbida, Na'tunland. What's the matter, you lost or something?"

"Something." Grant went back to tugging at the gristle between his teeth. The names meant nothing to him. *The names*—they weren't English, yet Aker spoke perfect English. Well, maybe not perfect—but crude English. This *must* be the key to key to the whole mess.

"Aker, how is it that you speak perfect Xtylporf . . . I mean Hiiopmert. . . ." Grant stopped and rubbed the sudden perspiration from his forehead. Aker looked up from his sword-sharpening operation, slightly startled.

"How come I speak *what*?"

Grant knew what he wanted to say; the concept was perfectly clear. The English language, tongue of our fathers, Shakespeare, literature courses at Co-

lumbia. The English language. He'd say it slowly this time . . . ENGLISH!

"UZQINNP!"

"You better give me the wine skin. I think you need some sleep."

"No, no. Aker, you must listen! Haven't you ever heard of . . . my country? The capitol city is Rtyydbx, I live in . . ." Grant didn't say it, he didn't want to hear it. He knew he would say something horrible that didn't sound in the slightest like New York. He could visualize the ideas so clearly, but he didn't have the words to express himself.

Was it amnesia? Or was it, the thought struck him suddenly, that he was no longer speaking English?

"What language are we speaking?"

"Why, High Na'tunlish of course. Are you stupid—or trying to kid me that you don't know the name of your own language? I can tell you were born here—no accent like me." He gave his chest a thumping blow. "I'm pure Inin tribesman. Slave traders stole me when I was a boy. I killed them later and became a Free Soldier. That's when I first learned Na'tunlish, so I still got a accent. Not like you."

Grant O'Reilly knew he had

not been born here. He was sure now that *here* was not even his own world. This must be another world altogether, separate from his own in time and space. He wasn't sure about the details—it had been a long time since he had read H. P. Lovecraft—but this theory seemed the most tenable.

It also explained the language difficulties—or lack of difficulty. He spoke the language of this world, or this part of the world. Sort of like turning a radio to a different station. Same tubes and parts, but a different frequency going in, so different words came out. It was as if he had been tuned out of his own world into this one. The words for *English* and *New York* did not exist here; only their abstract concepts existed in his brain. It was all very confusing.

The wine and the warmth of the fire were making his head heavy. He pulled what looked like a moth-eaten bearskin rug out of the pack and wrapped it around himself. There was another question he wanted to ask. He raised his head and opened his eyes.

"Aker, who were those men in the forest?"

The soldier growled deep in his throat like a big cat and spat into the fire. "Al'kahar ghouls! They're the curse of these filthy

woods. They *test* all the travelers they can lay their hands on and eat all the ones who fail the test. Something to do with their religion." He spat again, as if to rid his mouth of an unpleasant taste. "There are more of them in the valley, but we'll be out of their territory in the morning."

By heroic effort of will, Grant kept himself awake long enough to arrange the bearskin comfortably so that only his nose was sticking out; then, muffled and warm, he fell into dreamless sleep.

VII

In the morning it was raining. Rain dripped steadily from the mouth of the shallow cave, making long soggy looking icicles that fell off with a crash, leaving the dripping rock bare for the formation of more icicles.

The fire had gone out and the warmth long departed from the rock. The damp reached up from the sodden ground through the worn animal skin that covered Grant and drew the warmth from his body. He pried open gummy eyes and stared at the dawn sky, gray and dripping. He tried to go back to sleep, but Aker must have heard his movements. A prehensil toe reached

out and gouged him in the most sensitive part of his chilled anatomy.

"Get up and start the fire." The voice was muffled, but the meaning was clear. Grant groaned as he hauled his stiff form out of the covers.

The salamander burnt his finger instead of lighting the fire, and he pinched its tail in retaliation. He found a small log, back in a crevice of the cave, and dropped it on his toe and cursed with a growing fluency for at least ten minutes. In spite of this the fire was finally started, and Aker Amen pulled himself next to it and heated up a slab of ham. Grant followed suit, then turned back into his blanket and shivered with comfort, glad that it was raining. There was no going out into the icy rain and Grant wondered, if there had been no rain, *could he have picked up the pack and con-*

tinued? He answered himself. *No!*

After breakfast, Aker hummed a war song as he cleaned the matted blood and hair from the spikes of his mace, and told a few reminiscent tales of the skulls the mace had crushed. The rain continued, so he went on with each of his weapons and pieces of armor in turn, telling the stories they reminded him of as he cleaned them. The life of a free soldier was close to the life of a bandit, Grant decided as he listened. It was a carefree sort of telling, but incredibly villainous by civilized standards.

He crawled closer to the fire and wrapped himself more tightly in the blanket. Every joint creaked with the motion, and though he was almost as hot as a toasting ham slab, he continued shivering in spasms.



"You sick?" Aker eyed him sharply.

Grant came out with an excusing lie he had thought of to explain his faults, a lie that he considered more than half true. "No, just out of condition. Weak. I was . . . a prisoner a long time and I've gotten soft." He paused, ashamed but pleased by the respectful attention visible in Aker Amen's face, then added with a burst of worried truth. "I can't see why I keep shivering. I'm not cold."

"Stiffening up," Aker said casually. "If you don't keep moving around you'll be as stiff as a timber brace by morning." He chuckled, and reached a long arm for a branch from the depleted fire stack. "When you come back from collecting firewood, we'll have a little sword practice."

With every muscle creaking in protest like a rusting puppet, Grant dragged himself out of his blanket to look for firewood in the cold rain. When he came back, drenched and shivering, Aker greeted him with a blow of a light stick he had fashioned from a branch, and handed Grant another to defend himself with. Aker amused himself by swinging slow motion blows at Grant and watching him scramble clumsily to parry or duck.

Thus the day passed, and it

was probably the rain that gave Grant a chance to live and survive, for it rained the next day, too, and in the alternate drowsing by the fire and being prodded awake to seek firewood, in listening open-mouthed to Aker Amen's good-natured tales of thievery, rapine, loot and death, he gradually recovered from the exhaustion and cold-shock of the two days before. The shudders stopped, the weakness and stiffness passed and he ate more ravenously than ever in his memory, the meat going to fill some insatiable hollowness within.

Even as early as the second day, the thin muscles over his bigboned frame had begun to thicken, responding eagerly to the strains that, after a delay of years, had come to them as a cue for growth.

Grant did not appreciate the process; he only wanted to sleep and eat; and yet he had to busy himself collecting firewood. He picked up numerous small bruises around head and throat to the tune of Aker Amen's roaring laughter, until he learned to fend off the unexpected blows from the light stick in Aker Amen's hand. He was learning the elemental skills of handling a broadsword.

The muscles of his wrist and arm and shoulder were alerted

by this unaccustomed stress and put in their share of call for more nourishment.

At the end of the second evening, Grant and Aker finished the remains of the second ham, and, for a tidbit, ate a squirrel which Grant had put an arrow through in the afternoon. The rain stopped and only the sound of dripping and running water was heard, and the air began to chill.

"Tomorrow we move," growled Aker, and put his sword carefully beside him as he lay down to sleep, for with the rain stopped, the predators of the night would be abroad again.

"Where are we going?" Grant's question was muffled by the warm bearskin.

The other man had rolled up next to the fire. He raised his head for an instant, light from the fire glinting from his eyes. "We're going to a war of course, what else? It's going to be good. Wine and blood. Kill and be killed. Good, huh?"

The philosophy of these barbarians could not have been better expressed. Grant roused himself just long enough to answer, with a wry glimmer of irony. "Good, sure . . . that's the only way to live—die." He sank back into a dreamless sleep.

The fire crackled and died. The only sound was the dry rustling

of the dead leaves in the trees. The clouds blew away and the stars pierced the cold winter sky, sharp and diamondlike.

VIII

The next morning was clear and cold. Grant got up first without any prodding and, shivering, broke the stacked firewood free from the iced ground, and made a small fire. Aker sat up and began humming a battle chant as he buckled on his armor and hung his weapons at his belt.

The sight of the wicked instruments plus the memory of the past four days of bloodshed tended to make Grant thoughtful as he stowed away the contents of the giant pack. The idea of putting on that pack again merely to go murder or be murdered hardly seemed worth the struggle. If he were separated from Aker Amen he would not have to carry all that baggage.

The thought came to him with a twinge, for he liked the big soldier, and had a hunch the soldier liked him—that the rough treatment he was getting, by the standards of these people, was an extreme of good natured protection.

The big soldier finished stowing away his deadly arsenal and kicked the fire down into the snow. "Let's go."

Grant stood up beside the pack and cleared his throat. "Er . . . Aker . . . I've decided to try some other way of life . . . I mean . . . I'm not so good as a fighter . . . You don't need me along."

His big decision made no observable difference to Aker. The soldier hooked a giant hand through one of the packstraps and lightly swung it across his shoulder.

"Fine by me, only watch out for Berl-Cats. And Holy Men. The woods are full of them. And if you get clear of the woods, don't go near the peasants. They don't like strangers. If they catch a stranger they stick a big sharp pole through his bottom, and stand him out in the fields to dry out for a scarecrow."

The last words were a little indistinct as Aker was trudging off rapidly down the trail. Grant, who always had a pictorial mind, felt his anal sphincters twinge. He quickly followed.

Aker turned at his hail and dropped the pack on the ground, then went on without slowing his pace. With an inward groan, Grant slipped the straps into the well-worn grooves on his shoulders, and found with surprise that the burden was not nearly as heavy as he had expected. Perhaps because of the peculiarly vivid alternative Aker Amen's

remark had conjured up, but more likely because the ham was now eaten and gone. Grant thought he saw a tilt to the back of Aker's head which meant a big grin was on the front of it.

The trail wound out of the trees to the edge of the cliff again and steepened, going down its face toward the trees of the valley.

At the last turning, Aker suddenly became wary. "This place stinks like an ambush, I'll see what's below."

With Grant standing back and covering him with a nocked arrow, Aker spent a seemingly interminable time crawling up to the edge of the cliff with a branch in front of his face and peering down. Apparently satisfied, he crawled back, then went a little way down the bend of the trail.

Grant slipped the pack off his back and stretched his shoulder muscles. Nothing moved below. Aker had stopped on a little ledge and was again peering into the depth below.

Grant yawned, and turned his head automatically at a slight movement to his right, then went rigid as one of the hideous Berl-Cats came out of a cave.

It had not seen him yet, but he could see the nose and whiskers twitching, following some scent. There was a clink of

metal from the trail below. The beast looked up alertly, the ears turned in the direction of the sound. With one bound, it was at the edge. Aker was on the ledge twenty feet below, his broad back turned helplessly toward the animal.

With utmost silence, Grant raised his bow. The string was taut and he was sighting down the arrow as the animal's legs tensed to leap. The range was short and the twang of the bowstring and the chunk of the arrow came as one sound. The cat made a small mew of pain as its foreleg was pinned to its ribs. It had leaped as he fired.

Grant saw a perfect example of the reflexes needed to survive in this barbarian world. At the sound of the bowstring, Aker's head had jerked up, and at the sound of the cat's cry, the big man in the leather armor leapt back and had his sword out and braced, blade slanting up, ready to impale anything that landed on him.

If the big cat had landed on Aker, it would have been spitted. It tried hard to do just that, but it could not change its course in midleap. Snarling and twisting and clawing towards him in the air, it passed through the spot where Aker had been, caught with its good foreleg on the edge of the drop, was over-

balanced by the failure of its wounded foreleg, and twisted with an outraged mewling over the edge. There was a crash and a sound of rolling and sliding and scrabbling down through the brush.

Aker wiped the hilt of his sword before returning it to his scabbard, and looked up at Grant with more respect than before. "A fair shot, Granto." He waved Grant after him and moved towards the valley.

With caution, alert for the wounded cat, they filed down the path to the trees.

The snow began again, and soon filmed everything in white. The woods ended at the edge of a cleared field and they climbed an embankment onto a rutted farm road. The road swung through the fields and passed close by a sod-covered stone house.

Grant watched it nervously and found his suspicions justified as four bearded men, followed closely by a shrieking woman, ran through the doorway. They howled crude obscenities and swung a wicked assortment of flails and scythes over their heads. It was a startling sight, and Grant flinched back. Aker seemed to find it neither frightening nor interesting. He stood quietly, a bored sneer on his lips, as they approached.

The screaming men were just a few yards away when he whipped out his long sword and bellowed a terrible war-cry. The great weapon flashed just once, and the flails of the first pair were hacked in two. They stared stupidly for a long instant and then fled, howling a more despondent note this time. Long before they had resumed the safety of the house, Aker had turned his back and continued his interrupted course down the road.

The episode reminded Grant again of the value of swordsmanship. He picked up a stick and, as he trudged down the road, swung at every mark that caught his eye, trying to learn to gauge a swing from any angle to hit the spot precisely, imagining the spot as an enemy. It made the time pass entertainingly, and again he felt that sharpening of the senses, almost exhilaration, that seemed to have something to do with the steady exercise and something to do with the clean whiteness of the landscape and much to do with a feeling of irresponsibility.

They stopped at noon by a frozen stream and made a lunch from an unspeakable lump of bread dredged from the depths of the pack. Aker kicked a hole in the ice and they mixed a drink in the horn cups; half spring water and half wine. It was an

invigorating and thirst-quenching drink, particularly since the water seemed to be carbonated and flavored. Grant smacked his lips over it and made no attempt to understand the geological impossibility that produced it.

The road wandered up the wide valley and they stuck to it, rather than cut across the furrowed fields. About mid-afternoon the winter ended.

That was the only way that Grant could describe it. They trudged along the road, ankle deep in the snow, with the big flakes falling slowly on all sides. The sky seemed much lighter ahead, then Grant noticed what appeared to be a line drawn across the road. The near side of the road was covered with snow, but beyond the line the warm sun shone on the brown dirt road and green fields. They passed the invisible barrier with no difficulty but, on looking up, Grant saw that none of the snowflakes were getting through. The ones that approached simply vanished.

On three sides stretched a warm and fertile landscape; behind was a wall of whirling flakes and a frigid winter scene. Grant looked at it dumbfounded.

Sunshine and a warm breeze seemed to please Aker. He opened the collar of his jerkin

and took a deep breath of the grass and tree-scented air.

"Were getting close to the army. It's good to feel a little sun on the back. That's why I always like to work for the Good Duke Darikus—he's got gout and can't stand cold weather. *The sun always shines on Darikus.* That's what they say."

"You mean he's *causing* this warm weather?"

"Sure. He casts a mean spell. Built this one up twenty-five years ago, I hear. Hasn't failed yet. It's always mid-summer around him, no matter what the weather should be."

They had topped a rise in the road and before them lay a green meadow bright with tents and pavillions and dark with the figures of many men. Most of them wore leather or chain armor; a few, mounted on the six-legged horse-like animals, wore full armor of silver and gold. The air was filled with the murmur of many voices, of shouted orders and the clank of steel and sound of bugles. A guard tent stood close by the road, a half dozen pike-men lounging around it.

The nearest soldier sighted Grant and Aker. He leveled his pike across the road and challenged them in a sleepy voice.

"Halt and be recognized. What business here?"

"Free Soldiers to serve the Good Duke Darikus."

Satisfied, the soldier lowered his weapon and shouted toward the tent.

"Hey, Corporal, couple more guys want to join up."

There was a stirring in the tent and a young man with long, curling mustaches poked his head out. He looked the two men over with an insulting stare. His gaze fixed on Grant's sagging form, scanned the indoor pallor and the gentle look that was part of the blondness of his hair and eyebrows. The corner of the man's mouth turned back in a sneer.

"Looks like pretty poor material, but I suppose you better take them to the Duke—he'll hire anybody."

Aker spat full in the man's face and loosened his sword in the scabbard.

"Right you are, sonny, he hired *you*. I was fighting with the Good Duke when you were still peeking under your nurse's skirt." Aker started to walk away but turned and added, as a happy afterthought, "Want to fight?"

The corporal wiped his beet-red face and opened and shut his mouth like a fish out of water. He looked more closely at Aker this time. He saw the man's tremendous girth and

mighty arms under the travel-stained leather and thought twice. His head popped back into the tent. The soldiers grinned happily and a pair detached themselves to go with Aker and Grant.

They made their way through the camp and up to the largest tent, a sprawling construction of many-colored cloth. A pennant flew over the entrance, a black, mailed fist squeezing out drops of blood against a white field. The pikemen saluted the flag. Grant and Aker saluted also, then entered the tent.

Armed soldiers stood around the walls. Two littered tables stood in the center; a thin clerk with ink-stained fingers sat at one, an old man wearing a gold coronet sat at the other. Aker stepped forward and saluted with a thump of his fist against his chest.

"Hail, Duke. I am here to serve you."

"Hail, hell. Who are you and what's *that* with you?" the Duke replied testily, and shifted his bandage-wrapped foot on its cushion.

"Aker Amen and spear slave."

Grant started to protest his new status but closed his mouth when he realized that Aker undoubtedly knew best how to handle the situation. The affair with the corporal of the guard

proved that. The clerk was rapidly flipping pages in a giant, leather-bound book. He ran his finger down one page and then read from the selected line.

"Amen, Aker, born Inin, Master Swordsman, Axe Expert, Excelling Infighter, qualified on dirk, mace, arbolest, crossbow, scimiter . . ."

"All right, all right!" The testy voice of the Good Duke interrupted him. "Two gold *Enn* a day, and loot for you, loot for the slave and pick of the captured weapons. Done?"

"Done," Aker roared. "We fight to the death!" He slammed the flat of his hand down on the table, signifying his acceptance of the contract. The Good Duke slammed his down too and winced as the vibrations shook his gouty foot. Grant wondered if he should slam also, but Aker turned and pushed him out of the tent.

There were more men milling about now, and Grant saw why when they formed a ragged line leading to a giant stew kettle. He and Aker quickly joined the end of the line. As they shuffled forward he thought over the recent past, then turned to Aker.

"You never told me—who are we going to fight?"

"I don't know. What difference does it make? Get some chow, you're next."

When they each had a horn cup full of steaming stew and were finishing it off as they walked along, looking for tent space, Aker spoke again with his mouth full. "Ask an officer. He might know."

"Maybe later." Grant walked, absorbing the sun warmth and the rich mingled flavor of meats and potatoes and rice and unidentified vegetables. He was beginning to accept Aker Amen's philosophy. "Not a bad stew."

IX

The Duke was planning to attack the Tyrant Helbida, whoever that was. The fifth man Grant asked told him that much, but no one knew when they would attack, not even the Good Duke himself. According to the talk of the camp, every evening at sundown His Goodness cast a pair of twelve-sided astrological dice onto a silken cloth. So far the omens and portents of the dice had not been favorable for the morrow, so the army stayed in the encampment, eating and guzzling, lounging and quarreling, and polishing up on the arts of slaughter.

Twice a day, everyone turned out to the drill field, the soldiers and officers rounding up all the reluctant novices and conscripts that could not escape, and herd-

ed them to the field where they hammered away at each other with an earsplitting rattle and clamor. The experienced soldiers worked out against each other with live steel; beginners and those less competent were given wooden swords and poles for spears.

The novices were prevented from leaving the field during drill, but otherwise were not watched, so Grant transferred himself from the spear men to the group learning the broadsword. The reluctant beginners belabored each other, sweating and bruised, often angry and cursing, urged on by shouts from the officers. Grant found quickly when a parry was poor by picking himself up from the dust. But he husbanded his strength, put brains into his fighting, was watchful of techniques and thought about his mistakes when he picked himself up . . . and he kept at the practice in the after hours when most of the others left the field.

In a few days Grant sported a mask of colorful bruises and lumps, and a vastly improved fighting technique. Aker Amen, strolling over after working out with the swordsmen, sometimes separated Grant from his novice opponent and picked up a wooden sword to give Grant a few painful but useful demon-

strations of professional swordsmanship.

The fifth day a new element was added. For the entertainment of the professional soldiers and the officers who lined up on the sides, shouting encouragement and making bets, the end of the afternoon's drill was turned to a free-for-all. The trainees were turned loose on the field with instructions to fight, and keep fighting until disarmed or unconscious. The only rule was to keep the combat single combat still, but the rule was not enforced. Broken bones and missing teeth were in evidence from the moment the fray started.

One group of thickset louts, obviously farm conscripts, were the terror of the field; they stuck together, attacking in such close sequence that no outsider had time to collect his scattered wits between one bout and another. Soon their end of the field was scattered with the defeated, and a wide clear space was being given them by the others. Their leader was a young giant named Splug, who seemed to be beating down everyone he encountered by sheer weight and strength and fatness.

Grant tried to stay to one side and fight a quiet defensive fight without attracting attention to himself, but this time he had an

appointment with destiny. He was due to find out something about himself, a fact he had kept hidden for an entire lifetime.

Splug saw him from the distance and shouted, then charged with a roar of laughter, evidently deceived by Grant's mild expression and unassuming stoop.

Slobbering, he swung a simple overhand blow down at Grant with the clumsy simplicity of chopping wood. Grant parried it easily and thumped the other in the ribs on the return stroke. Angered, Splug swung again with tremendous force and weight, his muscles standing out under his fat. Grant's guard held, but by sheer push, he was forced to give ground. Stepping back, he found a wooden sword tip inserted between his feet, tangling them, and lost balance. One of the other farm hands was slyly helping his leader. As Grant tottered, Splug cracked him across the head and roared with laughter. When Grant stepped away from the entanglement and tried to return the blow, a foot tripped him from another direction, and the wooden sword hit his shoulder with a white burst of pain. Splug laughed again.

At that moment Grant felt one of his fits coming on. The ringing began in his ears and the pressure in his temples and

the distance from sounds. Why now, of all times?

The brutes were all around him, all wide and sturdy, and enough alike to be brothers, probably conscripted from the same inbred farm town. They all worked together; if Grant fell they would probably beat and trample him into the ground. The officers couldn't see what was happening. He had to fight.

He felt as if he were growing. Everything else seemed small and clear and the wooden sword seemed as light in his hand as a matchstick. The blows he received felt light and distant and the blows he struck seemed like taps. He swung countless taps at things that looked like Splug, or perhaps the same tap over and over; it was all the same. But through the distance, he was aware that he was enjoying himself. He felt relaxed! There was no resistance either inside or outside, as in a dream.

Then startlingly, everything went black. He came up to the surface again, sitting on the ground, holding his aching head in both hands. An officer was standing over him, slapping a weighted cosh into the palm of his hand thoughtfully. He scowled as Grant looked up.

"Just keep your temper after this, me lad. We're here for

practice, not for skull cracking."

Grant looked around dazedly at a circle of unconscious figures. Splug was a distance away, sitting up, holding his bloody face and moaning. Across the field the other fighters had stopped and were watching Grant. The entire thing made no sense.

The officer said, "You had reason enough. They were asking for trouble. But when you started to ram the broken end of your sword down the fat one's throat *you* were asking for trouble. I had to tap you one. Just try to save that kind of thing for the enemy from now on."

Looking around with slowly dawning understanding, Grant saw that all the men were Splug's gang. A few were beginning to crawl painfully to their feet and stagger away.

He felt himself blush. "I beg your pardon. I didn't mean to . . ."

"I don't say you didn't give fair warning, howling like that," grinned the officer. "But try to hold your temper down next time."

The grizzled bearlike man walked away, his gold armor glinting, but Grant stood up slowly, thinking of what he had been told—that he had a hot temper!

This was a thing he had never known. What he had been calling fits, and thinking of as illness, was temper, a hot, sudden wish to kill, too primitive for thought, too savage for civilized expression. It was too strange for recognition as part of the Grant they had always called a sweet boy, and a little angel—or later a sensitive type. Finding no outlet of action or thought for the emotion, he had had fits, rigid and shaking, with his mind a blank until the anger passed.

This time the temper had found outlet. He spun slowly on his heel, surveying his victims. The thought occurred that there might be a berserker, among his ancestry. From the Swedish side of his family, he had inherited his blond hair and almost white brows. He could have inherited his disposition also. The ancient Swedes were the people who occasionally produced berserkers, men of apparently gentle disposition who, in battle, changed and killed as savagely and blindly as uncaged tigers.

He stood there in the torn field, looking gentle and worried, not as skinny as before, but still a slim, tall figure with a scholar's stoop and a delicate look. Yet none of the others sneered at his slumped figure, and they left a wide space around him as they returned to their fighting.

He swung the broken sword in an idle pattern as he walked off, badly worried with the wonder of how close he had been the other times during his life. How near had he been to committing murder when he thought he was just being sick?

The next fit came just two nights later. He and Aker had been drinking late in a tent across the camp. They were weaving back, leaning on each other and singing one of the plaintive melodies of this world. Aker sang the verses and Grant came in, loud and flat, on the chorus.

*She told the king no, but smiled
at me*

*And lifted her dress above her
pink knee.*

*I said, why bless me, I never did
see*

Such a . . .

A dark figure stepped out from behind a tent and landed a heavy blow on the back of Aker's head. The big soldier dropped, the breath whooshing from his limp body, and simultaneously Grant was backhanded to the ground by a gloved fist, his uncertain balance easily destroyed.

The man stepped out into the moonlight and Grant recognized the mustached corporal of the

guard, on duty the day he and Aker arrived.

"Nobody spits in *my* face," the man muttered, and raised his foot to grind it down on Aker's face. As a burst of icy distance and rage shot through his brain, Grant swung his wooden sword up across the corporal's throat as if, by hatred, the wood had become a real sword. It seemed a light blow, but the man began to crumble together, then hunched over and poured blood out of his mouth as from a tilted bottle, and continued bending more and more until he folded down onto the ground, a shrunken and writhing bundle, rapidly becoming still. Grant stared numbly until he remembered he had heard of the deadly trick of breaking the larynx. Apparently he'd done it.

As Grant pulled himself to his feet, he became aware for the first time that someone else was there. The flap on a lighted tent had been thrown back and a man stood there watching. From the rings that flashed on his fingers, he must be a noble of some kind. He laughed suddenly, and Grant recognized him—the officer who had knocked him out on the drill field.

"Remember what I said, about controlling your temper."

He noticed Grant's tense position and laughed again. "Don't

worry, I'm not going to turn you in. Anyone who hits a man in the midst of a good song deserves what he gets. Drag your friend in here and pour some wine down his throat. I want to hear the rest of that verse. I thought I knew all of them!"

He turned back for an instant. "Bring the body in too. The armor and weapons are yours by right of conquest, anyone who can kill with a wooden sword deserves a man's weapon."

The next day Grant swaggered through the camp in leather armor with a bow and quiver of arrows slung on his back and the weight of a light broadsword at his belt. He enjoyed the way the servants and slaves of the camp scurried out of his path, the deference they gave a fighting man, and noticed the eyes of the women camp followers turning to him as he went by.

Then he felt something like a fool as he carefully took off his armor at the practice field and picked up a wooden sword to practice with. He showed himself no more strong or skilled than the day before when he had been merely ranked as a slave. But he lost himself in the exercise and the day passed quickly. At the dinner call, Grant grounded his sword, suddenly aware of weariness, but aware he had learned and improved.

He went to buckle his armor back on. After only one day it was beginning to feel like a second skin and he had felt naked without it.

Aker went by with the stream of men heading for the stew line and slapped him on the shoulder as he passed, which he had been doing often since Grant had won his armor, his way of expressing his pleasure in what had happened.

At the meal line the word was passed. The cast of the Duke's dice had been favorable. Tomorrow they would fight. There was a rush of last minute readying of weapons, and a blowing of discordant bugles for formations.

X

They marched in the morning against the forces of the Independent Free State of the Tyrant Helbida. The Tyrant's castle stood some miles up the valley. They didn't reach it until afternoon.

The Duke's forces halted in a rough semi-circle about the base of the castle and awaited orders. The castle was of black stone and seemed to grow out of the rugged valley wall. Flags flew from the battlements and occasionally a helmeted head could be seen peering over the edge.

There was a parley and one of the Good Duke's men rode into the castle through an opened postern. Some time later, the gate clanged open and the officer rode back, clutching the bleeding place in his face where his nose had been.

This decided the Duke. He waved his sword, the bugles blew loudly off key, and the men surged forward. They crushed around Grant, who clutched at the spear he had been issued and was pushed forward.

The air was filled with arrows and the roar and crash of battle. The first line of men carried wide shields and scaling ladders which they placed against the sheer walls. Men were clambering up the ladders under a canopy of arrows from bowmen in the rear. Their fire was keeping the parapets fairly clear, but archers concealed behind the crenellations and fire slots poured down a withering rain of arrows at those on the ground.

Grant saw men dropping on all sides, but there were always more pressing from behind. Then he was in the comparative safety of the base of the wall, too close for the archers at the slots to see him. He got his hands on the rungs of a ladder and started to climb. At the next ladder he saw Aker Amen climbing rapidly. Grant climbed fast-

er, wanting to get up level with Aker to give him a hail. The sight of the soldier's grin gave him a strange feeling of security in the midst of the surrounding carnage and death.

The man ahead fell off with a heavy rock bouncing from the top of his head, and Grant made an effort to catch him, then abandoned it and climbed rapidly through the clear ladder space ahead until he was two-thirds of the way up.

He turned, grinning, to shout to his Aker, just in time to see an arrow pierce Aker's neck from side to side!

For an instant, the big soldier's hands held their grip on the ladder and Grant stared into the glazed sightless eyes. Then Aker was gone over the side of the ladder, gone forever, and there was another man there climbing up from below.

Something hot snapped in Grant's head. Without any dizzying transition or any feeling of sickness he was the berserker, cold with hate, and life became a simple matter of efficiently murdering the maximum number of the enemies of Aker Amen. He climbed.

Men were dying ahead of him, and then he was first man on the ladder. The top of the wall was ahead, and a bowman was

peering down at him over a half-drawn bow. Grant drove his spear up into the man's eye-socket and pulled it back with a savage thrill in his arms as the point crushed through flesh. The man fell past him like a harpooned fish. Grant mounted the top rung of the ladder and reached for the top of the wall just above him, and saw above that the incongruous form of a large stew kettle. For an instant his mind puzzled over the incongruity. What was a stew kettle doing in the middle of the battle? The thought faded as the fighting urge carried him up the wall.

But it was not a stew kettle he realized, as it tipped. The mouth turned more and more toward him and he felt a rush of warm air, a blast of radiated heat.

The giant pot tipped and the mouth was vertical. There was a sibilant rush and a silvery stream of molten lead gushed out. It seemed to hang over his head, then rush down, and he dropped his spear and ripped his throat in a terrible scream.

XI

"Look what you've done!"

"What?"

"That loose thread—just look where you stuffed it. It's all out

of its own pattern and mixed up in this pattern over here."

"Well, put it back where it belongs. Don't bother me. Can't you see how busy I am repairing all the troubles you caused?"

"Troubles I caused? Why you . . ."

The angry voice was angrier now. The fumbling fingers caught at the misplaced thread, jerked it out and jammed it back into its own pattern. But not quite in the right place.

It all stopped. It stopped as suddenly as if a record had been broken, as suddenly as if a great hand, tiring of one station had spun a dial to another.

The battle shouts were gone, the pressure of the ladder rung was gone from Grant's curled fingers, and somewhere in the silence was a hollow distant booming, like the sound of surf heard down a tunnel. Burnt spots on his shoulder throbbed and hurt and a smell of singed hair and scorched leather was in his nostrils.

He could not see clearly, for the afterimage of what he had last seen still glared in his eyes. Like a curtain wherever he looked was the black silhouette of two men against the bright glare of the sky above, tilting their caldron of molten lead.

Grant blinked and the deadly

image broke into a swirl of vague spots, through which walls and gray ceiling could be seen. Crouched, he lifted his free hand, still curled as if grasping the rung of a ladder which had gone, and brushed at the burning spots on his shoulder. Hot pebbles were dislodged from holes they had burned into cloth and leather and fell to clack on the floor—lead that had been cooled by burning into whatever it touched, lead that had been molten spatters from the great caldron. He remembered the wave of molten lead that had poured from the caldron down toward him. There had been no way to dodge. Why had only these few spatters touched him?

The thought of safety reached him at last, he straightened from his tense crouch. It had missed him, and he was alive, and he was grateful, but the understanding of it escaped him.

If the ladder had broken, part of the wall crumbled into an opening that he somehow managed to reach instead of falling or remaining on the ladder under that flood of fiery metal . . . he shuddered and turned his attention away from the thought to the problem of where he was.

If he were in the castle, he had fallen into a great opportunity, if he could only open one of the sallyports. A dim light

filtered into the room through an open doorway, and a murmur of voices warned of danger on the other side. He pressed close to the wall and quickly glanced about him. Around the walls were boxes stacked on wheeled platforms. He was in some kind of small storeroom. The gray walls and ceiling were as smooth as the cloth of a tent and one corner of the room was crumpled down halfway to the floor, the ceiling and walls bent and wrinkled like a corner of a tent when an outside pole or guy rope is gone. Perhaps he had come in through an opening behind the cloth. It would be best to investigate, to have a way of escape when he needed one. Grant took a silent stride toward it and prodded it with his sword, expecting to find it soft.

It was hard. He stretched up and gripped a projecting edge. It was very hard, strong and immovable under his hands, with a texture like cloth frozen in ice. Some gigantic hammer blow would have had to strike from the outside to have crumpled a corner of this tough material. The room was like a tin can that had been kicked by a giant.

How had he entered? Into whatever limbo of unconsciousness the time had gone, it could not have been more than five minutes since he was on the lad-

der. The attacking force outside could not have taken the castle. If he could get out the way he had come in, and bring back Aker and . . .

Memory came like a blow. Aker was dead, an arrow driven through his throat. Grant put his hand to his eyes. He had seen warriors weep for friends, and Aker was worthy of such tribute, but no tears came. Grant's early training in civilized inhibition held while the wave came and ebbed again. Dry-eyed and grim, he lowered his hand from before his eyes. The people clicking and murmuring in the next room were of the castle and the castle forces that had slain Aker. They were his enemies.

Grant shifted his sword from his left to his right, where it was as much a part of his arm as his hand itself, and stepped, silent and deadly, through the doorway. Fifteen men and women sat in a half circle, facing the wall. They were not armed, he decided against slaughter. They seemed young, and unmuscled, dressed in something like dark silk pajamas. The men were shaven and both sexes had their hair cut short and were as neat appearing as courtiers at the retinue of a king. They sat in a crescent facing the curved wall tensely, concentrated on lights

flashing in front of them, their hands busy over a shelflike projection from the wall. The lights clicked and they murmured to each other occasionally in a sound like "Good!"

The wall made a complete circle. Near one end of the crescent was a monstrous gear wheel set into the wall with no apparent purpose, and close to Grant, directly behind their backs, was a door.

If they did not bother him, they were safe.

In silent strides, he reached the door and threw his weight against it. It was smooth-surfaced and cool, like metal, and it did not budge. There were no handles or bolts on the door. Grant stepped back and surveyed it, looking for the tell-tale smear of handprints that would show where to push to make it unlock, but the door was unmarred, a smooth, delicate green as if it were as fragile as egg shell.

He threw his weight against it, but it did not even tremble. It was metal, and a battering ram would not have dented it. It was strange to find metal thus used in a barbarian world where it was so scarce. A doubt was growing in his mind.

The crescent of people continued to work, unaware of him.

He turned to look beside the door for a hidden catch, but as

he turned, a lump of lead worked free from the leather of his corslette and landed on the floor with a skidding clatter.

Quietly, Grant turned to face the semicircle, lifting the point of his sword a little in their direction, warningly. Two or three faces turned and became astonished.

"Anyone shouts for help gets his throat slit to the backbone," he remarked to them, making sure his voice was clear enough to be heard by all.

The clicking ceased and a row of faces turned, identical smooth ovals with haggard eyes, as if they had not slept for many nights.

Startlingly, a voice from the wall spoke. "Do you see it, too?"

"It's real," said one of the young women.

"Squad coming," said the voice from the wall. "Hold the line."

The fifteen turned back to the sloped shelf, poking buttons and twisting dials. Buttons clicked in and clicked out, dials turned and lights flashed in strange patterns in the picture frames before them. Grant was suddenly uncomfortable. The mechanisms smacked more of science than they did of this crude barbarian world. He shook the thought off—it must be magic of some kind. After all, this *was* an enchanter's castle.

The voice in the wall had said *squad coming*; that he could understand. There ought to be another way out of the room. He had to make one of these people tell him. He slapped his sword against his calf and stepped forward, his voice sounding harsh and unreal in his ears.

"Where's the other way out? Speak up!"

They ignored him, and kept at their work at the control panels with concentrated intensity. They probably thought he was one of the castle warriors, drunk and straying out of bounds. Grant became irritated. He had only a few moments to escape and these were weaponless men, probably leige to the magician of the castle. He'd teach them to respect a fighting man.

He strode forward and put the edge of his sword along the center man's neck. "Answer," he bellowed. "Or I lop off a head."

They all jumped and alarm bells began ringing irritably all up and down the long panel. They corrected and silenced them with hasty jabs at the buttons.

The man with the sword at his neck gasped and pulled his head down between his shoulders as if he were a turtle, hoping to pull it entirely out of sight.

The two huge gears attracted Grant's eye; they were upright,

side by side, and sunk into the wall, one so sunk that only its gear teeth showed where they meshed with the other. They were magnificent examples of simple sheer mechanics. The spaces between the huge gear teeth looked large enough for a man. It reminded him of something from the almost inconceivable time before he had been snatched away from his wedding . . . the compartments of a revolving door. The two gears were like intermeshed revolving doors.

Revolving door. That was it. He had a good guess where the second exit was. "Answer," he said to the sweating, trembling one with the sword at his neck.

A girl stood up and said indignantly. "Let him alone, you maniac!"

And a man farther along with the haggard eyes of all of them gave Grant a cold look that wished him to the lowest pits of hell and said, "Tell him where the second exit is, Chris."

"Oh, no!" She was dismayed, and gave a glance in the direction of the cogs. Her deserted control panel broke into tiny ringing bells and flashing lights and she hastily threw herself back onto the stool and tried to push enough buttons to quiet it.

The girl's glance had been worried and almost friendly, but

it had told him more than she had meant. Grant had guessed right.

The double cog arrangement *was* a door. The tooth arrangement on one side kept any one from coming in, for the entering side was filled by teeth of the second cog, but it did not keep anyone from going out. A squad would hesitate to follow him out into the arms of the besieging army.

He laughed aloud. "Thanks," he told the girl. Sheathing his sword, he sprang past her into a damp, salt-smelling compartment and threw his shoulder against its far side in a great heave. It began ponderously to move. In the room he was leaving there was the sound of a door slamming open, running footsteps and new voices. The squad had arrived.

Then the next gear tooth swung over and shut off the sound.

He pushed again. As the compartment revolved with him, an odd incompleated impression came to his mind; something in the control room had been familiar, *too* familiar. It was a thing that had been sitting on the girl's panel and it looked normal in a way that was oddly disturbing—a tankard of—of, what . . . Then with a shock he placed it.

The thing had been a cup, a normal plastic cup in a square modern design, with a spoon sticking out of the coffee in it. A thing from a world and a time that had seemed a million years in his past. There was no coffee in the barbarian world.

He was no longer in the castle. He was no longer in the same epoch or even the same world.

Where was he?

The strange door finished its swing. With the force of a fire-hose, a wall of salt water smashed in, buffeted him against the back wall and filled the compartment before he had time to do more than draw a deep breath!

The revolving door had opened undersea.

XII

With his sword clattering at his waist and tangling with his legs, with the weight of his weapons holding him to the bottom, and his quiver dragging in the water that was trying to stop him from moving, somehow Grant forced his way out of the compartment and fought his way up through the cold green unbreathable water to the surface.

The water grew lighter around him as he took the last few strokes, and then his head

broke the surface and air and sky appeared around him.

After two deep breaths he sank again, the weight of his equipment pulling his head under. Exhausted, he had to swim back to the top. Ten feet away, a piece of driftwood bobbed in the swell and he swam to it, panting, needing most of his energy to stay up. It sank as he put his weight on it, but it held his head above the surface. It was a small, machine-cut beam with large bolts, and fitted well under one arm.

It was early morning, with the sun just risen over the horizon, turning the water in that direction to a sheet of white fire. The nearest land looked a good mile and a half away to the west, but there was a shiny thing that might have been a wrecked aircraft moving gently up and down in the swell only a quarter mile away. Some kind of planes or rockets were murmuring and buzzing high in the sky.

This was civilization. Perhaps the people undersea had set the coast guard to look for him. Grant thought wistfully of dry comfortable clothes and a good French dinner. Shifting his sword belt and bow to a more comfortable position, he began to swim, pushing the driftwood before him.

The sea heaved up and down,

smooth and treacherous and beautiful, lapping over his face and filling his mouth every third breath as each wave passed him, moving toward the distant shore. He remembered with bitter humor the reaction of the people undersea to his demanding the "other way out." As an architect he had learned that a revolving door made a good pressure lock. The thick strength of the cogs should have warned him of the greatness of the pressure difference between inside and outside.

Perhaps the people in the dome had been scientists running some kind of a radar fire control test, but why had they worn black silk uniforms that looked like pajamas? Had he returned to his own world?

Grant turned on his back to put his mouth higher and progressed at a considerably more rapid rate. A submerged on-the-back dog-paddle was his best means of moving through the water. It would have had him expelled from his swimming class at Columbia, but it moved him in the direction he wanted to go and it held his mouth up so that he could breathe.

There were fleecy clouds high in the dark blue of the sky and somewhere above the clouds, perhaps in the stratosphere, unseen aircraft hummed in a mul-

tipitched whisper, crisscrossing and looping, leaving tangled threads of vapor trails.

One of the threads angled downward and stopped suddenly; there was a dot of black smoke high up in the clear blue where a ship had exploded.

Some indefinite time later, Grant ran into something hard with an unexpected thump on the top of his head. Turning over, he saw that he had reached the wrecked aircraft that was his goal.

There was a door to its interior, sprung half open by a dent near the hinges, but it was too high to reach. The body of the aircraft was of some kind of white metal, like a standard alu-malloy, but the design was different. The wingtip he had run into was raked back so far it was more like a fin on a rocket. Grant began to climb onto the fin, but the wet metal was slippery, and so streamlined there was nothing he could grip.

Taking advantage of the rise and fall of the sea, Grant slid up the fin, lying flat. Something in the added weight shifted the balance of the half-submerged craft. It rolled over a quarter turn and the fin swirled down and disappeared into the dark water and was gone, leaving him swimming again.

The turn of the wreck had

brought the door opening down almost within reach.

He swam over to it, under the loom of the round sides, seeing his reflection in the wet metal as a face only, for the heavy weight of weapons and armor held him well below the surface. His legs were growing tired.

Below the doorway it looked impossibly out of reach, but he surged up with a sudden impatient energy and hooked one strong hand over the edge of the door, feeling the weight of everything he was wearing increase tremendously with the extra load of water they dragged along with them. With his hand over the edge of the opening, he rested, waiting to see if the wreck would roll again. The sea surged and fell with the man and the wreck, but the shattered aircraft did not roll.

Over the curve of the torpedo-shaped body, he could see holes three inches wide smashed through the metal. It was nothing that could happen to an aircraft by crashing into water. The plane had been shot down. Grant wondered who the fighting nations were.

As he hung there, he could feel the strain in his arms decreasing as the salt water drained from crannies of his armor and clothing.

He was light enough now to

climb higher. With a quick heave, he pulled up enough to get an arm over the edge and brought his head up to look in over the sill. He saw a very large empty control cabin. Sunshine, reflected from water cast a cheerful wavelike glitter of running lights inside, over a large control board and a pilot's seat that oddly had two narrow backrests instead of one.

Behind the pilot's seat, on the floor in a great unaccountable heap, was a tangle of what looked like brown crisscrossed branches and logs with the rough bark still on.

Something was watching him.

The cheerful interior of the cabin was suddenly a nightmare, and Grant was frozen, fighting an impulse to slip back into the water. It was as if the cold eyes of cobras were watching him from behind that heap of branches. As if death moved close and waited.

He stared at the tangled branches, trying to see what was generating the fear he felt. And coldly, something glared back at him, waiting. He could not see the stare, but he could feel it.

With every nerve in his body vibrating with warning, Grant cautiously swung one leg up and over the edge of the sill, and then completed his entrance in one move, rolling over once and

onto his feet with his hand at his sword and ready.

The sword would not come out of its sheath. He yanked again but it was stuck.

The branches began to move, came up and out toward him, swiftly untangling as they came, as if a silent explosion in the center were pushing everything outward. For an instant Grant had the impression that someone was throwing these sticks and twigs at him, and then another nightmarish impression that they were *floating, slowing in midair*.

He stepped aside to avoid one and yanked again at his sword; his foot slipped in some oily green liquid that coated the deck, while, swollen by the water, the leather of the sheath gripped his sword and would not let it free.

In the next instant the heavy "branches" had spread out radially, almost completely filling the cabin like tapered spokes. Grant realized that their shape was changing, the tips curving in toward him. *They were flexing.*

Simultaneously he saw the eyes between the humped shoulders of the gigantic branched tentacles, between strange orifices which opened and closed meaninglessly. They were set on either side of the deep gash that

opened into an interior of purple and green that oozed a slow seeping ichor. Red eyes glared hatred as the tentacles curved in toward him.

Between one thought and the next, Grant turned and dove back down into the welcoming sea.

He never reached it. Something hard and inflexible wrapped around his ankle and he banged against the ship's side. He looked over his shoulder and saw he was being dragged back by one of the branch-like tentacles. He forced down the rising panic and snatched an arrow out, fitting it to the bowstring. Grant drew back and aimed with the same motion, but a heave of the tentacle holding him brought him up to the door again and the arrow missed.

There was a sound that was not a voice, a wet, leathery gurgle. The grip on his ankle tightened with bone-crushing intensity. Grant tried to ignore the pain and, half upright now, sent another arrow after the first. This time it sank into one of the red eyes.

The tentacle gripped with a sudden spasm and then relaxed. He pulled the numb foot free and hurled himself backward out of the entrance. The bow was already slung across his shoulder when he hit the water.

He swam away, but not fast enough. A thin tentacle groped at him under the water and caught him around the waist. He clutched it away from his midriff and, sliding his dagger inside the loop, cut it away from his body.

As he splashed away this time it did not try to stop him. Perhaps it was dead. Grant had no desire to find out. He spotted his piece of driftwood nearby and swam towards it. Using it for support while he swam, he reached the surf by the time the sun was overhead.

The waves rolled him over and over a few times with rough humor before depositing him on the shore, shaking the arrows out of his quiver to roil in the surf.

XIII

For an hour or so Grant sat on the sand, patiently working his sword loose from the swollen sheath so he wouldn't rip the leather stitching. His armor was spread out on the sand around him, drying in the sun, and ever so often he would get up and patiently walk up and down along the line of surf, retrieving the few arrows the sea washed up.

When he finally separated sword and sheath, he set the

soggy leather aside to dry and began to scour the rusting blade with sand.

Whatever the similarities of coffee and plastic cups, this world was not his world. Not with such monsters in it as the one aboard the plane. His sword and bow would probably be good friends.

While he was scouring, a thing like a jet plane hummed louder than the others, flying low and coming nearer, flying so low it seemed to be looking for something.

He remembered the monster in the wrecked airship on the sea and stopped moving and lay flat in the sand while the flying craft roared close by and past and the roar dwindled to distance again.

There was a possibility that the aircraft held friends, but his hunch persisted in visualizing a mass of waving tentacles covered with something like rough bark, sitting in a pilot's seat with two upright rods for a back rest—a back rest with room between the rods for tentacles to protrude, directing the jet while keen evil red eyes scanned for human shapes on the passing ground.

By the time the sun was beginning to slide down in the sky in the afternoon, thirst was making him restless, and an urge

to find water for his dry throat was more than he could resist. Strapping his soggy armor and weapons back on, he started inland.

A brown fog seemed to hang over the land ahead as he walked, and the clean sea smell thickened to something subtly chemical and unpleasant.

Except for some low hills four or five miles away that showed traces of green, the land was as dead and desolate as the surface of the moon. The concrete road he walked on was broken and tilted; the ruins he passed looked as if they had been burned and shaken down by an earthquake and cratered by great holes.

A puddle of clean rainwater glistened in a hollow of the cracked cement, and Grant knelt to drink it, but the taste was strange and chemical, like the nauseous odor that hung in the air. Hastily he spat the water out and rose to his feet, swearingly thirsty.

For the first time he noticed the silence. Except for the hum and whisper of aircraft far away and out of sight in the sky, there was no sound, neither the distant hum of car motors and the blat of horns that would show the direction of a road still in use, nor even the distant barking of dogs which in all the ages

and variations of humanity still marks the presence of a town.

Looking around, it seemed to him that the barren earth gave off the brown poisonous mist. Ahead was the wreck of larger buildings, with the brown fog wrapping itself around them.

The air he breathed was sickly with the chemical odor, until he could taste it in his mouth again even though he had spat out the rainwater. He walked on a little way, thinking seriously of turning back to the clean air of the seacoast.

Facing him on the road was the wreckage of a huge tank. Its nose was dented in by a projectile that was still there, stuck half-way in. It had probably been intended to burst on contact, but it was still there, unexploded, like a giant cigar in the mouth of a giant face.

Grant walked around it, looking in the gun slits at the variety of odd weapons, and then thought of water as suddenly as if he had heard the word. He turned back toward the sea, and then stopped.

Behind the tank had been its tracks, fresh tracks.

"Water," this time he heard the word clearly, though very faintly. His ear was so close to the side of the tank that he heard the feeble motion inside. The

top hatch was open as if the occupants had escaped, but perhaps an automatic safety mechanism had done that, for a quick escape that was impossible because the occupant was wounded. Grant touched the side of the tank. It had heated all day under the sun, and the metal was searing.

The driver must be almost cooked by now. Shifting his sword belt behind him, Grant climbed to the top and called.

There was no answer except something that might have been a moan.

He climbed down inside.

Grant squeezed himself through the narrow passageway with his weapons clattering against the projecting edges of machinery. The air was intolerably hot, but it was comparatively clean air, without the poisonous miasmas of the outside fog.

At the end of the short passageway he found a tight little control room and a girl. The projectile which had hit the front of the tank had pushed the control panel almost to her chest and crushed in the control levers around her like a cage.

He knelt beside her and her eyes opened and she stared in wonder at the big man with the gentle expression and barbarian armor. She was brunette and

pretty, in the same black silk as the undersea people.

"Anything I can do?" Grant asked, regretting now doubly that he had nothing to drink. One of her legs was literally pinned, pierced by a rod, and in the heat she must have been suffering thirst more agonizing than his.

She pointed past him, and he turned and saw a water container clipped to the wall.

For a few minutes thirst controlled him, but when he had partially stilled the fires within, he held it over her eager mouth. She drank until it was empty then collapsed back with a sigh. Sanity gradually returned to the girl's eyes and her cheeks began to flush.

Her eyes wandered over his strange clothing, the oddly long hair. "My name's Taftha Long. What's yours?"

"Grant O'Reilly."

"What are you doing in that strange costume, Grant O'Reilly?"

He thought for a minute and laughed grimly before replying. "Either I'm some kind of a time traveler or the victim of one of the most extended practical jokes ever played on a human being."

"What do you mean?" She looked bewildered.

It was inconceivable that any-

one would believe the story he had to tell, so there was little point in telling it.

"It's a military secret." He leaned forward and kissed her lightly, and casually. "That's for being pretty. Now how about my getting you out of here? Would your leg bleed much if I pulled that rod out?"

She smiled, although growing pale again. "Could you . . .?"

For an answer he moved in close and began bending levers until he had space enough to get a good grip on the rod that pierced her thigh. It had missed the bone and gone straight into the muscle . . . it was a shapely thigh. He wrapped both hands around the rod.

"Brace yourself." He heaved and it gave under his hands and bent back and pulled from her leg, freeing her.

She shrieked briefly and sobbed until the pain dissipated. A moment later she was calm and self disciplined again, staunching a flow of blood from the blue-black hole where the rod had been, pouring disinfectant in it and wrapping a bandage from a first aid kit around it with quick military routine. Sweat stood out on her white face.

"What do you do now?" he asked, watching her. Her figure, showed pleasingly through the black silk and she was clean and

neat and efficient, unlike the women of the barbarian world. Yet compared to them, she was fragile and more like a little boy than a woman, with something cool and undeveloped in the way she moved. The stamp of a disciplined machine was on her.

"I'll finish delivering the formation cubes." She tried to stand up, wincing. He took an arm and helped her to her feet beside him in the narrow space. Her closeness stirred him, and the girl reminded him of Lucy. His hand closed tightly on the warm flesh of her arm, but she pulled free with an automatic gesture.

"I'm all stiff," she complained, "My foot is asleep." She stumbled toward the ladder and looked back to him gratefully. "I hope you have room for me in your tank."

He laughed. "I don't have a tank."

"But how did you get here? Nothing can live out there."

"I walked." He remembered the chemical smell in the air, the brown fog from the ground. "Why shouldn't anyone be able to live out there?"

She looked at him with the haggard, defeated eyes of the people underseas, and whispered. "Nothing can live out there. When the attack came, the gas . . ." She closed her eyes

against a memory and leaned for awhile against the recoil mountings of the guns, with her breathing irregular and tears squeezing from under her eyelids.

Grant stood in his own private horror, seeing suddenly the vision of green Earth made dead and brown and decaying, with people and their cities and animals and birds alike vanished, the world a corpse. His voice was almost a whisper as he asked. "You're still fighting?"

She straightened defiantly. "We'll burn the atmosphere from the Earth before we let those things have it."

He thought with grim bitterness about the destroyed world her remark had implied. The human race was not doing so well in this version. He would not find his French restaurants except as burned ruins. For a moment, a fear came to mind that this was his own world, that these horrible changes had happened to it when he was gone, but he dismissed the idea. If there was one hope he had to cheer him, it was a hope that everything would change again as reasonlessly as the first time, and he would find himself in the safe friendly world he knew, an undestroyed world.

But this girl deserved better surroundings. If he had a hand

on this girl the next time he went through to another world, could he take her with him? He liked the idea, but it seemed to be the farthest thing from the girl's mind.

All he could do was forget about it for awhile. He was in a wrecked tank in a destroyed world battling monsters. In a wrecked tank with a pretty girl, and she had an errand which he should help her with. But the tank interior was so narrow it was practically shoving her into his arms.

She looked at him with puzzlement. "I can't understand why you don't know these things. I thought all the survivors were in military bases underground."

"I wasn't." There was little possibility of explaining to her where he actually was while her version of Earth was being blasted and the human population she knew were dying. He considered trying to put it clearly into words, but his brain reeled. "You say they are still fighting?"

"We're holding them off." Efficiently she was checking through the contents of an emergency kit she had pulled from some recess of the tank. "Here, fill this with water—there's a tap back there." She handed him a deflated balloon-like water bottle. "We think that

there aren't many left, and they probably have no more of the gas. If we can keep them from landing on Earth, the only materials they have to build more weapons are from the moon and asteroid belt. But if they find any more of the bases or underground factories, or find the control center for the automatic warheads, they could destroy it and get past the projectile screen."

Grant listened intently, filling the bottle at the water cooler while the plastic container inflated to the size and weight of a gallon bottle. He stood up and hitched it to his belt. What she was saying was hard to understand but it sounded like twentieth century warfare, and he struggled again with the uneasy feeling that this world might be his own world, horribly changed in his absence.

"You'll come along and enlist, won't you?" she asked appealingly.

The narrowness of the tank interior brought her against him again, and she was attractive. But her eyes were not aware of him—they were full of patriotic purpose.

He said, "I'll go along to make sure you don't get hurt."

She gave his primitive bow and arrows a puzzled glance but refrained from asking any ques-

tions. He had said it was a military secret and she was trained to respect that phrase. She slung a bag marked *Formation Cubes* across her shoulder and turned to the hatch.

Grant had to lift her up the ladder and out of the tank, for her injured leg was too stiff to bend and support her on the ladder. He enjoyed the contact; but once outside, she refused help and began limping along at a rapid rate.

They headed for the seacoast, away from the poisonous fogs of the land, and when they reached the sand, turned north. Grant took off his foot wrappings and strode along barefoot.

The hum of the aircraft overhead seemed nearer, and he could hear the faint popping of distant explosions. The thought came to him that this last stand of the human race could possibly end in defeat, and he wondered where they would hide if the tantacled invaders broke through those high defenses and landed on Earth as masters. The thought made him uneasy, and he glanced at the girl, to take reassurance from her confidence. But behind her tilted chin and determined limping stride there was the haggardness of the people underseas. The eyes, shadowed from looking towards a possible future that held a world

devoid of the human race, showed the grimness of survivors who have learned that their species is not unconquerable—the responsibility of survivors who see no one else left alive to take responsibility. She limped on, not noticing his glance, intent on delivering the formation cubes.

"The fighting is coming closer to the ground," he said, striding beside her, with the water bottle gurgling faintly with every stride.

She glanced at the sky, paling. "Strategy," she said. "The Von Neuman players let them through unexpectedly every so often to break their formations, and then destroy more easily the ones that penetrate."

"Players?" He remembered the people at the control boards underseas and his fleeting impression that they were playing some sort of a game.

She explained. "Earth's best chess players, trained in the Von Neuman basic mathematics of competition and battle. They direct the remote-controlled weapons. The underground factories turn out remote-controlled proximity rockets, a steady stream of them, about ten a minute, and launch them, and the Von Neuman players send them up and keep them fighting in a solid defense shield in an unpredictable changing pattern

that stops every attempt of the aliens to get through and land. The alien *things* have learned what's happening and have just one goal now, to find the control center of the weapons, the brain of all the rockets that attack them, and destroy it in one blow. But it's well hidden, somewhere under the sea. We of my station don't even know where." She looked proud. "*They* won't ever find it. They grow weaker and fewer every day. Soon the rockets will have destroyed them."

Grant knew who the people undersea were now. They were the Players. He strode along silently for awhile, concealing a case of the shudders. He had been very close to killing the people underseas.

They passed a sandy bluff and the girl stopped, and studied the terrain inland, frowning in concentration, then pointed, her arm lovely and fragile in the black silk.

"I think the station entrance is that way. I'm not sure; the tank was supposed to go in automatically on a subsonic guide note."

Grant helped her over the tumbled boulders to the broken sidewalks. They came to the wreckage of a small town and the subsonic vibrated against the soles of their feet like

thunder in the distance, felt but not heard. Taftha stared from one building to another, then suddenly broke into a limping run towards a half collapsed store.

"It's still there," she called. "The manual control! We can get in."

A gray metal box was built flush with the wall. She opened the lid and pushed buttons. There was a muffled rumbling and a tremendous heap of rubble stirred and humped slowly upward. A gap opened beneath the hump and widened and lifted until it was a tunnel mouth with a ramp big enough for a tank. Rock dust drifted away in a huge cloud as the rubble ceased to slide.

When the ground rumble ceased, they suddenly became aware that the sky sound had increased; the distant explosions above were not so distant, and there was a thin, far-off whine that was increasing and nearing at terrifying speed, coming straight down. An alien ship was screaming toward them!

Taftha's face blanched under its coating of dust, and she tugged at his arm. "They must have been watching for it to open," she gasped, starting for the opening. "*Run!*" she shrieked, as the whine became a roar.

Too late! The alien ship had been holed and riddled unmercifully on its way down, but it still operated. The forejets blasted fire, and the ship landed before the open portal like a wall dropping between them and refuge.

Grant only realized that Taftha had continued running when he saw her beside the alien ship, the formation cubes clutched tightly to her breasts, trying to run around the smoking bulk. But a port snapped open and a treelike horror snaked across the ground and wrapped about her ankles. Taftha fell heavily, the formation cubes rolling ahead of her.

For one suspended instant of time Grant hesitated; this being was alive and deadly, not weakened like the one aboard the wrecked plane. A scream of pain from the girl decided him. When he leaped, it was towards the monster.

The speed of his attack saved him. Perhaps the dust, thick in the air, prevented it from noticing him. His sword whistled in a blurred arc and almost severed the tentacle holding Taftha. As it recoiled in pain, freeing her, his left arm caught about her waist. The inertia of his rush literally swept her from her feet and carried them well beyond the

alien's reach. The mouth of the tunnel was before them. Grant veered to plunge into it.

Taftha's feet touched the ground and, with a desperate wriggle and a push, she squirmed out of his grip and ran back to the monster.

Grant looked on with amazement. Was the girl insane? No sooner had he rescued her than she turned back to the horror in the wrecked ship. Then he saw what she was doing, cursed and ran after her.

Those damned formation cubes! She had gone back for those doubly damned formation cubes. And the alien, with its tremendous other-world vitality, was coming after her. She had the cubes, but as she turned, like a dream where there is no escape, the tentacles clutched her.

Grant stepped in again, sword swinging, but this time the alien was waiting. Grant sidestepped the first attack of twisting branched tentacles and hacked at those imprisoning Taftha. They released her and darted at him as she ran with the formation cubes, her eyes set ahead with only one purpose. Grant leaped away, too, and crashed his full length on the floor. Before he could turn and strike, the sword was dragged from his hand. Taftha disap-

peared through a side door of the tunnel.

The monster apparently felt the same revulsion towards him as he towards it. It held him with an almost human disgust.

The branching tentacles, some of them dripping a loathsome green from fresh wounds, seized and tore at him.

A tentacle tightened around his throat. Its twig-like projections broke through his skin and the larger tentacles were twisting his limbs from their sockets.

Through the red haze of pain he heard the voices. He knew he was dying and screamed aloud at the voices, but they did not hear.

"Grissel, look where you put that loose thread!"

"Look where she put it! I didn't go near it. It's all tangled up in the wrong places—you'd better cut it."

Grant, on the very borderline of death, passed over. The voices were fading.

"You can't cut it. The whole design will unravel. I'll weave it into these loose parts here, and later we will have to use it in the design there."

"I don't think it should go there, it wouldn't fit in at all. . . ."

The voices died at the moment Grant lived. The tentacles

vanished and he was rolling down a hillside. He thumped against a boulder and sat up, rubbing the snow from his face.

Snow! Then he must be back in the world of the barbarians. It wasn't the best place to be, but at least he knew how to make his way around here. Rubbing his bruised limbs, he searched in the drifts for his sword. There was no trace of it around the spot where he had landed. It must still be with the alien from space. He shuddered a little at the memory. As if in echo of his thoughts, a soul-piercing scream came from a grove nearby. The hackles rose on his neck and he jumped to put his back to the rock as he tore out his dagger.

His elbows were braced against the rock, the dagger straight out before him. If it was a Berl-Cat he didn't stand much of a chance, but anything else would have a fight on its hands—or paws.

There was the thumping of many feet, branches cracked and broke as the screaming came nearer. Grant wiped some of the blood from his slippery hands and braced himself for the attack.

Around the rock they came, twenty of them. Their multi-colored clothes snapped in the

wind as they ran. They stopped suddenly when they saw Grant's ragged and bloody figure. Then, screaming now with terror, they turned and fled.

Grant lowered his dagger. Just children playing in the snow. Children in coats and leggings waving toy pistols.

Toy pistols!

He looked up at the gray cliffs, just visible through the winter haze. They seemed to move in his vision, as he looked with his mind as well as his eyes, and he saw that they weren't cliffs at all, but giant buildings. He looked at a scenic bridge in the hollow and remembered it—and the buildings and the children.

He was in Central Park.

Home again, back in his own world! The strength drained from his legs and he sat heavily on a boulder. Home again, back in the world he never expected to see.

It was home, the buildings, the children, the familiar clothes they wore. A cold finger of doubt touched him suddenly. Did kids wear those funny beanies with propellers on the top? He

couldn't remember. Was he home—or almost home? Or perhaps a few years early—or late?

The thoughts were disquieting. So was the memory of those voices he had heard. They had something to do with his going from world to world. What *had* they said? Something about going *here* and later *there*. Was *here* home or was *there*?

There was a crackling of branches again, in the woods. A blue-coated policeman was puffing as he pulled himself up the slope.

Grant could detect nothing wrong in his uniform.

As suddenly as they had come, the fears were swept away. Grant climbed to his feet and smiled at the world. He had had enough of being afraid. He would get along here, whether it was his own world or not. It didn't make that much difference any more. It didn't even matter what his mother would say about his ragged clothes, if this were home.

He slid his dagger back into the sheath and, smiling to himself, went down to meet the worried policeman.

NOTHING TO IT

BY WILLIAM S. CORWIN

IT wanted to take over the world, of course—and that meant that Mr. Smallweed had to think about a man. But while IT went on brunking evilly, Mr. Smallweed was busy with a few choice thoughts of his own.

Mr. Smallweed and IT went down the street, Mr. Smallweed on the sidewalk and IT somewhere off in the middle distance.

"IT," Mr. Smallweed demanded, "where are you, anyway?"

But IT was sulking.

"1 2 3 4 3 7 4, 3 7 4. Brunk!" IT said. "UUUuuu-UUUuuu: Brunk! BRUNK! Kloob, kloob, kloob, kloob. Brunk! Don't hover—. Don't brother—bother me."

Mr. Smallweed lit a cigarette.

"We are not where we were," IT added. "We have never been where we are." Then IT gathered itself together. "This is a good world, this Earth you've got here," IT said.

"We think so," said Mr. Smallweed.

"So do we," said IT. "It's a shame you men are making such a mess of it. Care for a drink?"

"Why do you ask?" asked Mr. Smallweed.

"It's a thing people say," said IT. "Think of a man."

"Think of a man yourself," Mr. Smallweed told IT.

"I don't know what a man looks like," IT said. "I've never seen one."

Mr. Smallweed stopped at the orange crate on the corner and took a paper. He gave the newsboy a nickel.

"Keep the change," he said.

"It's seven cents," said the newsboy stoically.

"I'm a man," Mr. Smallweed told IT.

"I've never seen you," said IT.

Idly Mr. Smallweed thought of a man—and IT was a man.

"How awkward!" said IT in a pained voice.

Mr. Smallweed was taken with a fit of laughing. He stamped his feet. He bent over and held his middle. He dropped his cigarette. He forgot to think of a man.

Immediately IT was itself again.

A man in a hard hat tapped Mr. Smallweed on the shoulder.

"Pardon me," he said. "Did you know it was following you?"

Mr. Smallweed eyed him keenly.

"Goodby," he said.

"Don't mention it," said the man in the hard hat.

He tipped his hat.

"Think of a man," IT said.

Mr. Smallweed thought of a rocking chair. IT was a rocking chair. Mr. Smallweed sat down. He rocked and smoked thoughtfully.

"Where are you, IT?" he demanded.

"We are almost," said IT. "All we need is practice. We're taking over, you know. Think of a man."

Mr. Smallweed thought of beer.

"Let's have that drink," he said.

He picked IT up by the neck and put it in his overcoat pocket. It was snowing. IT was cold. Mr. Smallweed went in the bar.

"Cold beer," he ordered.

"Look at it!" said the barman.

"Goodby," said Mr. Smallweed resignedly.

"If you say so," said the barman.

Mr. Smallweed sipped his beer. He glanced over the headlines. He noted that there was

still very little peace in the world.

"Tell me more," he told IT.

"We've been around for years," IT said, "but you're the first one that's noticed."

"What do you want?" Mr. Smallweed asked.

"Everything. The world."

There was a penny lying on the floor. Mr. Smallweed looked all around with the low cunning that comes by instinct to even the most honest man when he finds money. He quickly picked up the penny.

"What about us?" he asked, straightening his back.

"We can use you."

"I don't think I like you," said Mr. Smallweed.

"That's immaterial," IT said.

A girl in sequins took Mr. Smallweed's eye. Mr. Smallweed pushed away from the bar and went over to her. He stood looking down at her and she looked up at him with pleading promise in her eyes.

"Later," Mr. Smallweed said.

He gave her his cigar.

"Think of a man," IT urged.

"You're harping," said Mr. Smallweed.

He began to think of a man and thought of a rabbit instead. IT was a rabbit. Mr. Smallweed picked IT up by the ears. IT kicked. Mr. Smallweed looked IT straight in the eye. He threw IT

up in the air. IT fluttered down and perched on Mr. Smallweed's shoulder.

Mr. Smallweed thought of a dog. He thought of an armadillo. He thought of a porcupine and a fish and a garter snake and a butterfly and a snail and a lobster and an antelope and a jelly fish and a skink.

"That tickles!" IT giggled.

Mr. Smallweed thought of a potato and an onion and a melon and an avocado and a grape and a rutabaga.

"Cut it out!" IT gasped. "Think of a man!"

Mr. Smallweed thought of a table and a desk and an ironing board and a steeple and a flight of steps.

A bat-eared kid came up to him.

"Hey, mister," he said, "what time is it, huh?"

Mr. Smallweed examined his watch reflectively.

"I don't know," he said. "I'm a stranger here myself."

"Think of a man! Think of a man! Think of a man!" IT commanded, brunking with evil impatience.

Mr. Smallweed thought of a firecracker. He took out his pipe and tobacco tin. He loaded his pipe. He got out his matches.

Mr. Smallweed struck a match. He lit his pipe. He kept thinking of a firecracker. He lit the fuse. IT made a lovely noise. There was nothing to IT.

FANTASY BOOK OF THE MONTH

Readers of FANTASY FICTION are already familiar with Conan the Cimmerian, two stories of his wild adventures having appeared in these pages. (THE BLACK STRANGER and THE FROST GIANT'S DAUGHTER). Long time readers of fantasy have always kept a special place on the shelf for these stories of Robert E. Howard.

The latest in the series of Conan books, though the first chronologically, is the COMING OF CONAN. (By Robert E. Howard, Gnome Press—\$3.00). It is a collection of Conan stories, containing the best ever written about the barbarian hero.

Of interest to the collector is the chapter containing part of the history of the Hyperborean Age as well as a King Kull story. The book opens with introductory letters by R. E. Howard and H. P. Lovecraft.

SCHIZOID CREATOR

BY CLARK ASHTON SMITH

When a modern psychologist gets mixed up with ancient grimoires, there's bound to be the Devil to pay. But sometimes, the Devil comes in ways not precisely covered in the legendary warnings for handling him.

In the private laboratory which his practice as a psychiatrist had enabled him to build, equip and maintain, Dr. Carlos Moreno had completed certain preparations that were hardly in accord with the teachings of modern science. For these preparations he had drawn instruction from old grimoires, bequeathed by ancestors who had incurred the fatherly wrath of the Spanish Inquisition. According to a rather scurrilous family legend, other ancestors had been numbered among the Inquisitors.

At one end of the long room he had cleared the cluttered floor of its equipment, leaving only an immense globe of crystal glass that suggested an aquarium. About the globe he had

traced with a consecrated knife, the sorcerers' arthame, a circle inscribed with pentagrams and the various Hebrew names of the Deity. Also, at a distance of several feet, a smaller circle, similarly inscribed.

Wearing a seamless and sleeveless robe of black, he stood now within the smaller, protective circle. Upon his breast and forehead was bound the Double Triangle, wrought perfectly from seven metals. A silver lamp, engraved with the same sign, afforded the sole light, shining on a stand beside him. Aloes, camphor and storax burned in censers set about him on the floor. In his right hand he held the arthame; in his left, a hazel staff with a core of magnetized iron.



Like Dr. Faustus, Moreno designed an evocation of the Devil. But not, however, for the same purpose that had inspired Faustus.

Pondering long and gravely on the painful mysteries of the cosmos, the discrepancy of good and evil, Moreno had at last conceived an explanation that was startlingly simple.

There could, he reasoned, be only one Creator, God, who was or had been primarily benignant. Yet all the evidence pointed to the co-existence of an evil creative principle, a Satan. God, then, must be a split or dual personality, a sort of Jekyll and Hyde, manifesting sometimes as the Devil.

This duality, Moreno argued, must be a form of what is commonly called schizophrenia. He had a profound belief in the efficacy of shock treatment for such disorders. If God, in his aspect as the Devil, could be suitably confined and subjected to treatment, a cure might result. The confused problems of the universe would then resolve themselves under a sane and no longer semi-diabolic Deity.

The glass globe, specially constructed at great expense, contained at one side electrical apparatus of Moreno's own devising. The machine, far more complex than the portable

apparatus used in electric shock treatment, could release a voltage powerful enough to electrocute simultaneously all the inmates of a state prison. Moreno considered that no lesser force could effect the shock necessary for the cure of a supernatural personage.

He had memorized an ancient spell for the calling up of the Devil and his confinement within a bottle. The globe would do admirably for the aforesaid bottle.

The spell was a bastard mixture of Greek, Hebrew and Latin. Its exact meaning seemed doubtful. It was filled with such terms as Eloha, Tetragrammaton, Kis, Elijon, Elohim, Saday and Zevaoth, the names of God. The word Bifrons recurred several times. This was no doubt one of the Devil's numerous names. But there could be only one Devil.

Moreno disregarded as childish those old demonologies that peopled Hell with a multitude of evil spirits, having each his own name, rank and office.

All, then, was in readiness. In a firm, sonorous voice which might have been that of a priest chanting the Mass, he began to recite the incantation.

When the summons came, Bifrons was busily engaged in

amorous dalliance with the she-imp Foti. Like Janus, he was two-faced; and he possessed multiple members. Since Foti herself was somewhat peculiarly formed, their love-making was quite complicated.

Bifrons began to withdraw his members from about the she-imp, explaining, "Some damned sorcerer has gotten hold of that ancient spell containing my name. It's the first time in two hundred years. But I'll have to go."

"Hurry back," enjoined Foti, pouting with her four lips, two of which were located in her abdomen. "If you don't you may find me otherwise occupied."

The air sizzled behind Bifrons in his exit from the infernal regions.

Dr. Moreno felt surprised and even appalled when he saw the being that his incantation had called up in the globe. He had scarcely known what to expect, and had paid little attention to old pictures and descriptions of the Devil, seeing in them only the dementia of medieval superstition. But the teratology of this creature seemed incredible.

The two faces of Bifrons bloated alternately against the globe's interior; and his arms, legs, body and numerous other parts squirmed and flattened

themselves convulsively in a furious effort to escape. But through the thickness of the glass, or the power of the surrounding circle, Bifrons was bottled up as helplessly as any djinn imprisoned by Solomon. He resigned himself presently and began to relax, floating awhile in mid-air, and finally seating himself on Moreno's electrical machine. As if feeling more at home, he looped some of his parts around the various pairs of forceps, ending in electrodes, that projected from the huge and intricate device.

"What the devil do you want?" he bellowed. The glass muffled his voice, which was still sufficiently audible. His tones bespoke anger and resentment.

"I want the Devil," said Moreno. "And I presume that you are he."

"*The Devil?*" queried Bifrons. "It's true that I'm a devil. But I'm not the Old Man himself. There are many thousands of us, as you should know if you've read the demonologists. I'm no infernal prince but merely a subordinate, though with special powers of my own. Again, what do you want? Money? Women? A Senatorship? The Presidency of your cock-eyed republic? Name it, and I'll grant the wish. I'm in a hellish hurry to get out of here."

"You can't fool me. I know that you are the Devil—the only one in the universe. And I don't want any of your gifts. All I want is to cure you."

Bifrons was startled. "Cure me? Of what? Say, what kind of a sorcerer are you anyway?"

"I'm not a sorcerer but a psychiatrist. My name is Dr. Moreno. My hope and intention is to cure you of being the Devil."

This madhouse doctor must be crazy himself, thought Bifrons. He cogitated. The trend of his cogitations was betrayed only by a sardonic one-sided twist of his left-hand mouth.

"All right, I'm the Devil," he agreed finally. "But let's get this over with. What do you mean to do with me?"

"Subject you to shock treatment," announced the doctor. "A very special high-voltage treatment. It should be the best thing for schizophrenia like yours."

"Schizo-what?" roared Bifrons. "Do you think I'm a lunatic?"

"Let me explain. I am using the term schizophrenia in its literal sense, meaning split personality—not as commonly applied to several types of psychic disintegration or regression. I think that you are really a sick Deity. Your illness consists in being Satan part of the time. A genuine case of dual and alter-

nating egos. The Satanic self dominates at present, otherwise I shouldn't have been able to call you up. But we'll soon remedy all that."

The demon thought it well to conceal his consternation. He must get back to Hell as soon as possible and make a report. Satan, he felt, would be interested in Dr. Moreno.

"Get on with your treatment," he enjoined. "What is it, anyway?"

"Electricity."

Bifrons assumed an expression of double-faced dismay. "That's a highly dangerous and destructive force. Do you wish to annihilate me?"

"The result should be different in your case," said the doctor in his most soothing professional voice. "Are you ready?"

Bifrons gave a bicephalic nod. Moreno stepped cautiously from the circle and went over to a panel of switches and levers set in the laboratory wall. Watching the demon closely, he began to manipulate one of the levers.

The numerous forceps of the machine, on which Bifrons had so conveniently seated himself, closed themselves on various parts of his anatomy, applying their electrodes to his skin. A pair, hitherto concealed, sprang forth and seized his temples tightly.

Moreno grasped a switch firmly and turned on the full voltage. Then, still cautious, he returned to the protective circle.

A shower of sparks and short blue bolts issued from the machine within the globe. In spite of the many forceps that had tightened upon him, Bifrons writhed and tossed like a harpooned octopus. Smoke seemed to pour from his head, body and members, muffling the apparatus that held him captive. Soon a dark-brown cloud, seething and swelling, had filled the globe's interior, concealing everything from view. The cloud was something that Bifrons could emit at will, like the fluid of a cuttlefish.

As a matter of fact, since his nature was itself electrical, he had absorbed the terrific voltage with merely a mild discomfort. The dark cloud was a necessary screen for the tactics that he now intended to use.

Perhaps, Moreno thought, the treatment had been sufficiently prolonged. He could repeat it if necessary. Emerging once more from his magic shelter, he turned off the switch and reversed the lever that had served to manipulate the forceps. Once again he went back to the circle.

After an interval of silence there issued from the clouded globe a voice which had no re-

semblance to that of Bifrons. It was both thunderous and mellow. To Moreno's inexperienced ear, it sounded like the Voice that spoke to Moses on the mountain.

"I am cured," it announced. "You have restored Me to My Divinity, O wise and beneficent doctor. Pronounce the formula of release and let Me go. I will return straight to Heaven. Hell is henceforth abolished, together with all evil, sin and disease. The Devil is dead. God alone exists. And God is good."

Moreno was enraptured, believing that he had realized so quickly his fondest professional hope. Scarcely knowing what he did, he uttered the formula that served to release an imprisoned spirit.

Afterwards he asked, "Now will You reveal Yourself to me? I would behold You in all Your glory."

"It cannot be," the Voice thundered. "My glory would blast your eyes forever. Therefore the cloud with which I have surrounded myself."

A moment later the globe was burst asunder in flying fragments, like some gigantic bottle of new champagne. The released cloud, billowing vastly and voluminously, seemed to overspread the whole laboratory in an instant. Bifrons, raging

behind it but still invisible, proceeded to wreck all of Moreno's equipment like a dozen baboons gone berserk. Tray-laden tables were overturned and smashed into splinters, shelves were pulled down with a crashing of countless vials and carboys. Coiled tubings were twisted and bent and ripped apart, heavily insulated wires snapped like twine. The old volumes of magic, piled in a corner, sprang into flame and burned to ashes in a few seconds. A violent wind, coming as if from nowhere; took up the ashes and scattered them throughout the room.

Moreno, protected by the circle, alone escaped the demon's wrath. He crouched at the circle's center, cowering and gibbering, while the cloud passed away through windows from which every pane had been broken.

Several of his colleagues, coming to consult him that evening found him still crouching on the wreckage-littered floor. He did not seem to recognize them, and had obviously become deranged. His mouthings appeared to indicate a sort of theological mania.

The colleagues held an impromptu consultation of their own. As a result, Moreno was removed gently but forcibly to the same type of institution as

that to which he had committed so many of his patients. His friends and fellow-psychiatrists deplored the interruption, perhaps the ending, of an illustrious career.

The wrecking of the laboratory remained a mystery. Had there been an explosion caused by one of Moreno's experiments? Had the doctor himself destroyed his equipment in a state of violent mania? Or—should the occurrence be classified as an act of God?

Fuming at the interruption of his tryst with Foti, Bifrons nevertheless thought it incumbent upon himself to report at once to Satan when he returned to the nether realms.

He found the Master of that picturesque region occupied in caressing a half-flayed girl. The flaying had been done to render the caresses more intimate and more exquisitely agonizing.

Satan listened gravely to the demon's account of Dr. Moreno. His tapering artistic fingers, with long-pointed nails of polished jet, ceased their occupation; and a furrow appeared like a black triangle between his luminous marble brows.

"This is all very interesting—and rather unfortunate," he said. "However, you have acted with admirable aplomb and

presence of mind. The situation should be well under control as long as Moreno remains in the madhouse where you and his colleagues have landed him."

He paused, and his fingers resumed in an absent-minded fashion their gentle raking of his victim's lumbar regions.

"Of course, as you understand, Moreno was quite mad from the start. But lunatics with a speculative bent can sometimes stumble overly close to certain guarded cosmic secrets and there are spells which even I must answer and obey . . . not to mention the Unspeakable Name, the Shem-hamphorash, which coerces and compels Jehovah. After he recovers from his present state of shock, Moreno might be adjudged sane—and released to continue his researches and experiments.

"Such an eventuation must be forestalled permanently. My good Bifrons, you must return immediately to earth and watch over him. I have full trust in your abilities, and I confer upon you plenipotentiary powers. All I ask is, that you keep this doctor well bedeviled and legally insane until the hour of his death."

When Bifrons had departed, Satan summoned his chief lieutenants before him in the halls of Pandemonium.

"I am going away for awhile," he told them. "There are certain obligations of a pressing nature that call me—and I must not neglect them too long. In my absence, I consign the management of Hell to your competent hands."

Bowing reversely, Gorson, Goap, Zimimar and Amaimon, lords of the four quarters, went out one after one, leaving their prince alone.

When they had gone, he descended from his globed throne and passed through many corridors and by many upward-winding stairs to the small postern door of Hell.

The door swung open without touch of any visible hand. A long white robe seemed to weave itself swiftly from the air about Satan's form. His infernal attributes withered and dropped away. And the long white beard of the Elohim sprouted and flowed down over his bosom as he stepped across the sill into Heaven.

MEDICINE DANCER

BY BILL BROWN

When Tatha danced on the medicine drums, the applauding crowds went home in heavy rainfalls, no matter what the weather predictions were. It was time, she felt, for a new set of drums and a new medicine dance.

The red convertible raced around the shoulder of Big Dog Mesa in a loose and frantic sort of driving. It sucked dust up from the gravel patches in the macadam, laying these floating clouds in the hot air as smoke signals had once hung over the mesa.

If the girl was frantic, it showed only in her driving. Her black hair was smoothed tight across her scalp and bound around her head with two braids as slick as blacksnakes. The ends of the braids hung down in two short tails to give the suggestion of Indian she wanted.

Taka jerked the car around a chuck hole and glanced off into the valley to the right, thankful

for the dryness and barrenness. It had been weeks since she had seen anything but rain, torrents of rain and wet, slippery streets. At every town where she'd danced on the big medicine drums, it had rained.

The best primitive dancer in America, they said. She'd read it in the columns and heard it on the air. Sensational! Savage! But they didn't know it was the medicine drums with the corn and the lightning symbols that made her dance that way. And no one knew yet that she brought the rain.

The white people weren't evil like Old Pete, her father, had said. No, they called her the Thunder Bird and they gave her a thousand dollars a week. And



sometimes they let her sit at their tables in the nightclubs and they bought her champagne even when it was against the law in some states to buy a drink for an Indian. And they groomed her and polished her and made her a calendar cover Indian girl in a pure white-feathered head dress. And they all got drenched to see her because they would come in light clothes when the weather report said fair weather and she would dance on the drums and it would rain in the night even while she was dancing.

The town of Big Dog suddenly came into view. It was only a service station and post office and store all in one building and two frame houses from which the paint had blown off with the sand storms. Behind a little hill to the right of the town, kept neatly out of sight as junk yards are hidden behind high board fences, were the wickypups of the Indians who herded sheep around Big Dog.

With the town in sight, the girl drove faster until the two big medicine drums in the back seat rumbled with the vibration. And she didn't decrease her speed until she had to brake hard to bring the convertible into the service station, scattering the gravel with her tires.

A man in blue denims and a

red shirt, his black hair in a queue down his back, was mounting a tire on a rim. He was pressed against the wall of the station, trying to work in the narrow shade.

"Uncle Charlie!" Taka called. "Where's Pete?"

Charlie looked up from his work and squinted until he made out who the girl was. He waved a tire tool in the direction of the Indian village. "Home," he grunted. Taka drove around the service station, down the path toward the village.

Old Pete's wickypup was the same as it always had been—built of pieces of corrugated tin and old boards and canvas; and Old Pete was sitting on an ancient car seat by the door whittling on a gun stock.

He looked up at the red convertible and at the finely molded, sophisticated girl who stepped out. Taka ran to her father and hugged him around the neck and kissed him.

"Father," she said, half crying, "didn't you get my telegram?"

Old Pete grunted and scratched himself under his blue shirt. He drew a yellow envelope out of his shirt pocket. He looked at it curiously and handed it to his daughter.

"Papa," she said. "You didn't even open it!" Old Pete stared

at his daughter as though he was unaware of her brilliant red dress the color of the convertible, and the emerald on her finger and the big gold earrings.

"You read," he said.

It had been two years since Taka had seen her father, but she knew this would be her greeting. That was Old Pete's way. Taka laughed and tore open the envelope.

"I'm coming home, Papa. I need you. A thousand kisses. Taka."

Old Pete grunted and took the telegram from Taka and looked at it and folded it back into his pocket. He walked over to the convertible and ran his hand over the flank of the car and patted it as though he was testing pony flesh. He grunted without pleasure.

Taka noticed the old man still held himself straight when he walked, as a chief should, and she noticed he still wore his two braids with red ribbon on them. She had a silly feeling that he wore them to spite the smelly black asphalt highway that had come through the Indian country. Something for the tourists to stare at and photograph.

The old man came back to Taka. "Why you come home?" he asked in his pigeon English that was his affectation.

Taka began to cry. "Terrible

things happen, Papa, when I dance on the drums!"

Old Pete stared down at his daughter, stern lines cut into the stone of his face. "White men do this to you?"

"Oh, no, Papa. The white people have all been good to me." And she told him how the good people had come out in their fragile clothes and how, every time after she danced, they stood helpless under dripping awnings waiting for taxis. And she put her hands over her eyes and cried.

"It's those horrid paintings on the drums, Papa—but without the medicine drums I can't dance at all. My feet are like rock!"

"Does anyone else know, Taka, that it rains when you dance?"

Taka shook her head. "Not yet. But they'll find out. And then I can't dance any more. Oh, please teach me a new dance, Papa! Please!"

Taka went to a hotel twenty miles away, leaving the problem up to her father. Old Pete picked up his shotgun that leaned in a corner of the hut and he waded through the thorny brush and up the hill behind the village where rattlesnakes lay coiled on the rocks and stunted cactus tried to grow. At the top of the

hill, Old Pete sat down on a rock and sat still for an hour with the shotgun across his knees, staring down into the valley below the mesa.

It was true, without a doubt, that Taka was the medicine dancer. When was the last real medicine dancer? That was Old Pete's grandfather. And before him? Old Pete couldn't remember. But then the white men came and told the Indians dancing for rain was superstition. They still had rain dances, but it didn't rain any more. And now here comes Taka, a true medicine dancer after three generations.

Old Pete stared down into the valley, trying to think what it was like before the white men came—when his grandfather and all the medicine dancers before him kept the valley green with rain and the corn was thick and the valley was full of buffalo and any time you could see dust on the mesa from antelope herds. But now there was only dry waste and the sticky black highway and the dingy town. No good to make rain here now because the white cattlemen owned the valley. It could never be the Indian's again . . . never. . . .

Old Pete sat for another hour thinking his Indian thoughts and feeling his bitterness for

the white men rise up. What kind of a chief would he be today if the great tribe was still here? If he had a hundred bucks in war paint and a hundred thundering ponies and a war bonnet of eagle feathers? . . . The fat cattle to be slaughtered on the ranches. . . . If it weren't for the highway. He remembered the last pony, the buckskin—how he found him bloated and fly-blown beside the highway where a car had hit him. . . .

Yes, Old Pete could teach Taka another dance—one that wouldn't bring rain. Yes. . . .

Suddenly he rose and walked over the hill and killed a turkey buzzard while it was gorging on a dead coyote. He found a rusty tomato can in a heap of dumped garbage and he drained the turkey buzzard's blood into it. He went to the base of a butte where the red face clay used to come from and he found the old pits around a dead spring. He stared awhile at the old Indian symbols painted on the rock and then he went back to the hut with the red clay and the buzzard's blood.

Old Pete stretched new buckskin over the drums and he painted it with the old symbols he saw on the rocks—zigzag lines with a jiggle on the end that some ancient ancestor

thought of as a rattlesnake. And he painted the red fire spirit that was half a mountain and half a man with a big black mouth.

When Taka came in her red convertible the next morning, the old man drew two circles the size of the drums on the ground and he taught her the new dance—the slow moving, stiff-legged dance with the short steps, and then the fast leap from one circle to the next; and Taka's bare feet pounded on the ground like buffalo hooves.

"But I'm clumsy," Taka complained.

"On the drums your feet will have wings," Old Pete said.

"Let me try it on the drums now."

Old Pete shook his head. "Paint not dry," he said.

Taka pouted. "But Papa, I have to dance tomorrow in Los Angeles!"

"Paint dry tomorrow," the old man said.

Taka was back in Los Angeles before dark the next day but it had taken fast driving to get there. Her first show went on at seven and when Taka made the drums hum with her feet, the diners paused and some stood up, leaving their drinks and their steaks on the tables. And

some of the diners stayed in the club until the last show which was at midnight when Taka came out with her drums again.

Taka danced on the drums, stiff legged and jerky, her feet pounding like buffalo hooves. She knew she had never danced like this before. The drums rumbling like ponies on the warpath, like war thunder over Big Dog Mesa. It was as though she couldn't stop dancing; her feet drew magic from the medicine drums and she danced sometimes half crouched and sometimes bent over backward, all in the old forgotten rhythms. She didn't stop, even when the people in the night club, dressed in their evening clothes and silks, overturned the tables and the men fought one another with chairs and bottles and the thin women in their doll dresses screamed when their clothes were torn.

Taka kept on dancing, stiff-legged and jerky like a machine. Buffalo hooves . . . ponies on the warpath . . . thunder over the mesa.

And because of the thunder of the drums, people fighting in the night club couldn't hear the sirens all over the city—sirens that had been tuned to scream when war missiles were launched from across the sea.

Capital Expenditure

BY FLETCHER PRATT

If witches practice magic, and magic is the process of obtaining whatever is wanted for nothing, why aren't all witches happy and beautiful? Or is magic perhaps a little more logical than we think?

Dick Bentress tied his tie and contemplated his day with what might be described as restrained satisfaction. The part that lay immediately before him had only a mild interest; not that he objected to working in the purchasing division of Allied Import-Export, but the performance of routine tasks after he had spent so much time—and a certain amount of money—on studying everything a good college evening course could teach about specifications and materials—that was getting boring. A second reason for the restraint on his satisfaction lay in the fact that he was not going to see the reason why he wanted to get out of routine into a higher income bracket until the following day.

The reason was named Candy Evans; she was a dark blonde, but-alas!-also a violinist, and had a rehearsal call for the evening. Dick Bentress adjusted the hang of his jacket, put on his Homburg, contemplated in the mirror the fact that he was well-dressed, with his mind the fact that he had a job that would get him somewhere some day, and was adequately provided with a hobby and a girl, allowed some of the restraint to lift from his satisfaction, and went out into the street.

The scrambled eggs he had with his sausage were done exactly right, which caused still more of the restraint to rise. The bus was on time, and with empty seats; the sun was shining and the Cincinnati Redlegs



had won another. Therefore the world had become a fairly comfortable place by the time the bus reached the corner of Third and Grand. As he stepped from bus to curb, his lips pursed to negotiate the opening bars of the triumphal march from *Aida*.

Then it happened.

An ankle came in contact with his as he took the long step; he went sprawling through the air and landed on the sidewalk on his stomach with a sound of ripping cloth. He jack-knifed up furiously, confirmed his fear that the neat jacket would never be neat again, and swung around. "Why the hell don't you—"

He stopped.

The other party to the accident, now being helped to her feet by an old man with a briefcase, was the type one would choose for Person I'd Most Like to Have an Accident With. The hair that flowed to her shoulders from under the slightly disarranged hat was red; the features would have done credit to a movie actress, and as far as he could judge, the figure would have done credit to a strip teaseuse.

"I beg your pardon," said Dick Bentress. "I wasn't looking where I was going. I hope you aren't hurt." He bent to retrieve her bag from where it

lay beside his new Homburg.

"It was my fault," she said. "No, I'm all right. But you've torn your coat. Oh, dear!"

"Don't mention it," said Dick. "I have a spare." There wasn't any ring on her left hand.

"No, listen," she said. "It really was my fault and you must let me pay for having it fixed. Aren't you Mr. Bentress?"

"My fame has preceded me. How did you know? And I'm not going to let you pay for anything."

"Because I saw you when you put on that magic show at Cliffside two weeks ago. You were awfully good. By the way, I'm Marion Saxon."

He took the hand she extended. "Glad if we please our public, but why didn't somebody introduce us at the time? And what were you doing at a show for the Parent Teacher's Association? Are you a parent?"

"Not yet. I'm just awfully interested in magic of all sorts."

People were brushing past them, hurrying to work, and Dick Bentress was struck with an inspiration. "Look," he said. "If you're free this evening, why don't we have dinner together, and I'll tell you about it? That is, if . . ."

She looked down. "All right. Where—?"

"Can I call for you?"

"If you like. It's 321 Summit Avenue, and I'm on the second floor. Apartment 2-B. About six."

He wrote it down and flicked from his hat a tiny pigeon feather that it had picked up during its contact with the street. "See you tonight, then. And I'm sorry I ran into you, again."

He was whistling again as he entered the office. From the next desk, Walter Oldman said, "Why all the good cheer? You look as though you'd had an encounter with a hurricane."

Dick grinned, reached over and took a half-dollar from the hair of a passing stenographer, and said, "Maybe I have. She comes from your neck of the woods, too. Remember that show I put on for your Cliffside P.T.A.? She was there, but you never thought of introducing us. Were you salting her down for yourself?"

"Who do you mean?" said Oldman.

"A dame named Marion Saxon. She lives at 321 Summit, near enough so you ought to know her."

"Oh, I don't know her personally, but I know something about her. Couldn't help it; all the old biddies in Cliffside have made her their number one tongue-target. She's our local

mystery woman. Moved in about a month ago, apparently has plenty of money and no troubles, dresses well and minds her own business. That's one of the reasons for the hatchet-brigade. The Saxon ponied up for the P.T.A. show and contributed to the Health Fund, but when it came to playing footsie with something like the bridge club, she wasn't having any. And the local bucks don't make any impression on her, either. Just unapproachable, that's all."

"That's damn funny," said Dick and sat down on the edge of the desk so his voice wouldn't carry through the office "Damn funny."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I just met her at the corner of Third and Grand. The way I met her was that we tripped each other up as I was getting off the bus. Only—I'll swear the way I was tripped had all the earmarks of a pickup. And when I asked her for a date tonight, she didn't hesitate long enough to let me change my mind."

Walter Oldman chuckled. "Must be your fatal charm. You better not let Candy know you're going out with her, though. The Saxon has the equipment to make any girl-friend tear up rugs."

"It doesn't mean anything,"

said Dick. "She's interested in magic and might have some ideas. I've got to get up at least one good new stunt for the carnival of the Society of Amateur Magicians next month or lose my license, and so far I haven't been able to figure anything out."

He swung his legs down. "Oh, by the way," said Oldman. "Carver called in from Pittsburgh last night after you had gone, so I took the message. He says the head chemist at Murphy is willing to let us have the formula for that new Murphy-lene detergent for laboratory testing, but we'll have to take an engagement not to let it go any further. Doesn't want it to get into the hands of the competish."

"Damn it!" said Dick. "And that five-ton order from Brazil specifically stated that the formula must accompany shipment. And we can't afford to antagonize Sabaudo e Companhia."

II

When he tried to kiss her at the door, she put up her hand, and said, "No. Not tonight." Then she hesitated, as though she did not quite know how he would take it. "But you can come in for a highly unconventional drink if you want to. I live alone."

He followed her through the small foyer into a living room furnished with taste if not distinction, except that under one of the windows was something that looked rather like a bird-bath on a standard, about two feet across.

It seemed to be carved from alabaster, and there was a curious design of lions in fields of lillies around the bowl.

Dick put down his hat and went to inspect it. "That's an interesting piece," he said. "Where did you get it?"

"I brought it with me when I came," said Marion, adding ice to the drinks.

"Where *did* you come from, by the way? I don't recognize the type of work on it."

"Secret," she said, and smiled to show it was a mild joke, then sipped. "I wonder . . ."

"You wonder what?"

"I wonder whether you've ever thought about getting things you want."

Dick said, "Most people do. In fact, that's what life consists of, isn't it—wanting things and trying to get them?"

"What do you do when you want something very much and don't see any chance of getting it? For example, what do you want most without being able to reach it right now?"

Dick's brows contracted in a

frown. "If you're serious about it, I suppose I'd like a transfer and promotion at my shop. I've studied a lot of chemistry and physics and things about specifications and materials, and I'm perfectly qualified to take over the testing department, but I can't seem to get to first base."

"Why not?" Her voice was cool and quite serious.

"Prejudice, I suppose. There isn't any real coordinator in that division, anyone who knows more than part of the general picture. But the boss won't have one; he says it's the policy of our firm to work in vertical departments—you know, the office that handles machines does everything with anything that has to do with machines, and so on. I think it's holding us back."

Her lovely eyes looked at him under arched brows. "Have you thought of trying magic to get what you want?"

He laughed, took the white handkerchief from his breast pocket and tossed it to her. "Look it over," he said, and stepped over. As she handed it back to him, he rolled it up in a ball, then opened his hands to reveal a brilliant red and purple bandanna. "Now can't you just imagine me stepping in on the boss and doing that, then saying, 'Because I'm so

good at this, I want to be made head of a new specifications department'."

"But that isn't magic," she said. "That's illusion. I watched you on the stage, and most of the others you did are illusion, too. Though I think you did do one or two pieces of real magic."

She was so obviously so earnest that he lifted his glass to conceal the laugh. "I'm sorry," he said, "but I'm afraid it was all illusion. I'm a member of the Society of Amateur Magicians, too, and I don't know of a single stunt that any member does that isn't illusion. The fun of it is to try to figure out how the illusion was accomplished."

"Oh." She leaned forward in a manner that emphasized a plunging neckline that had something to plunge for, and her face was serious. "I thought—it's so hard to tell sometimes. But weren't there real magicians at one time?"

"There may have been some of the old medieval alchemists who thought they were magicians," Dick said judiciously. "But that's as far as I'll go. Every now and then one of them would hit on something the science of his day couldn't explain, and he'd think he'd brought off a bit of magic. Nowadays we do it with a test-tube."

"And the witch-doctors? And

how about the voodoo men?"

"Pooh. They get their effects through the credulity of the victim. Seabrook investigated that; an essential element in putting a spell on someone is that the victim be notified he's been given the business."

"You're hard to convince, aren't you?" she said. "What about witches?"

"There never were any. Real ones, that is. The Salem trials showed that. But again, I'll admit there may have been some characters who believed in it themselves. Just as some gypsies really believe in the fortunes they tell, and other people swallow things like astrology and lucky days."

"Aren't you a little dogmatic? People felt very strongly about those things."

Dick flung out a hand. "Look here, there isn't one particle of real evidence at any place or time for the idea that natural events can be controlled by supernatural means, and that's what it all comes down to. Besides, look at it logically; all the witches ever heard of are horrible old crones. If they could really work spells, wouldn't they doll themselves up a little? Or at least make people have the illusion they were good looking?"

Now she rather surprisingly smiled. "Couldn't there be an-

other explanation for that?"

"Such as?"

She lifted one hand to her cheek. "Well, suppose, just suppose that in witchcraft as in other things there's some kind of law that you can't get something for nothing. Now how do you pay for your success as a witch and how do you make the payment? Or let me put it another way; a real spell would have to be a something, a force applied. What would the driving power be?"

Dick grinned. "Go on. I can almost see where you're going, but not quite."

"Well, suppose one step farther. Suppose that the force came from a person's character or body—that every time you worked a spell you had to pay for it by losing something, a little here, and a little there. In the long run wouldn't a witch who had done a lot of witching wind up as a rather horrible old crone, as you put it? And wouldn't even people who knew how to make spells avoid it and perhaps not tell others how?"

This time Dick didn't avoid laughing. "That's a novel idea; a magical spell as an item of personal capital expenditure. If I were what you call a real magician, I'd want to be pretty sure I got full value in return before I took on working one."

Marion Saxon gave him a long, intense glance. She was really disturbingly beautiful, and not even the thought of Candy could prevent his pulses from stirring—and the thought of Candy didn't stay around long. "Would you care to try it?"

She meant it. Dick said, "If you think for a minute—"

"Would you?"

"If you're game for some kind of an experiment, so am I."

"All right." She got up swiftly and gracefully and went toward the kitchen, talking over her shoulder. "I happen to believe in what I've been saying, and I think I can convince you."

In a moment she was back with a pitcher of water, which she poured into the bird-bath arrangement, then went to the bathroom to come back with a bottle he recognized as Murphy-lene detergent and splashed some in.

"You see this isn't any hell broth," she said. "It's really very simple, all in knowing how and being willing to give the time and effort and other things, the way you do with your illusions." She sat down and slipped off her shoes. "Oh, would you mind turning back the rug just there?"

Anything else Dick might have thought was drowned in

an overwhelming curiosity as to how this was going to turn out. He said, "Why the shoes off?"

"To make use of the earth-currents. The shoes have nails in them."

"So does the building."

"Ah, yes, but it's connected directly with the Earth and I'm not."

She went to the little desk in one corner, produced a square box and perched it on the edge of the bird bath, then turned. "Now I'm going to do something so you will be head of that department you want so much. But it's just as you said; it's going to cost me some of my personal capital, and I want something valuable in return."

"What do you want?"

"I'll tell you afterward."

"Oh," Dick said. "So there's a catch in it."

She shook her lovely head. "No, there isn't. I promise you it will be nothing you can't easily afford to give, but if I tell you now, it will just increase the price I have to pay."

"It's a deal." He reached over and took the hand she extended, and it struck him that this was surely one of the most serious mad enterprises in which he had ever engaged.

She said, "Do you mind going in the bedroom and closing the door? I'm awfully sorry, but

"I can't take a chance on you watching."

Reflecting that there were certain resemblances between "real" magicians and mediums, Dick did as he was told. The bedroom was small and rather uncomfortably feminine, and the books on the night table were nothing to write home about. He sat down in one of the fluffy chairs and lit a cigarette with the intention of composing himself for a considerable wait, but he had hardly got rid of an inch of ash before the door was opened and Marion Saxon stood in it, still shoeless.

"All over," she said, "and thanks for waiting."

Dick followed her back into the living room. "And now you think the boss will reverse himself and I'll get that department?"

"You will if you follow directions," she said confidently. "Here." She handed him a small bottle which, as he held it under the light, he perceived as containing a damp feather. "You'll have to arrange so this touches him or his clothes or something belonging very intimately to him, and then say something to him that will lead to his thinking of the department. You don't even have to mention it directly."

Dick gazed at the bottle. "And what did you have to pay for

this? I mean how much of your personal capital did you lose in exchange for helping me out?"

"I don't know yet," said Marion Saxon. "The spell is only potential so far; it hasn't drawn on me for life-force yet. But if it's only a prejudice he has against setting up your department, it probably won't be too serious. I shall be lame for awhile, or become frightened of dogs or lose a toenail . . . something like that. It's only really serious when you make someone do something they very much want not to do, or have to overcome someone else's spell."

"All right," said Dick. "And now for the real sixty-four dollar question. What do you want in return for this service?"

She held up the bottle of Murphylene. "I want the formula for this. I know it's a secret process, but you ought to be able to get it, especially if your department is set up."

Dick experienced an acute sensation of shock. "But whatever good would that do you? You can buy all the stuff you want and it isn't very expensive."

"You remember we were talking about magic involving the expense of personal capital? You might call this capital-saving equipment just as you have labor-saving equipment. No, I'm not going to answer any more

questions until you have your department. Then you can see me again. Good night."

Dick said good night too, and went out, not knowing whether to feel amused or tolerant. It had been a pleasant evening with a rather surprising end. As he reached the street, he took out the bottle and gazed at it again. He had suddenly remembered that after the girl tripped him that morning, he had brushed a wet feather from his hat.

And it hadn't rained for two days.

III

The mechanics of how it worked if it worked were gnawing at Dick's mind as he put his hat on the office rack next morning, together with the question of how he was going to plant that feather on the Elephant, which was the office name for the boss, otherwise known as E. L. Oliphant. However, having gone this far with the matter, he was going to play out the string; you didn't drop a sleight-of-hand stunt from your repertoire because it didn't seem as though you could ever make it work the first time you tried it. So he waited until the usual ten-thirty hour of the Elephant's arrival, gathered up the correspondence from Sa-

baudo e Companhia, and wended his way to the office where Miss Christie stood guardian of the Elephant's stall.

"Hello, beautiful," he said. "How's everything?"

Miss Christie, who only asymptotically approached the description of beautiful, sneezed and dabbed with a Kleenex. "Everything's terrible," she said. "Frankly, Dick, I'm afraid I'm going to have to get another job."

"Sympathy," he said. "What's the trouble with this one?"

"Nothing's wrong with the job. It's just that I can't stand the air-conditioning. It gives me summer colds all the time."

"Sympathy again. Why don't you try some of those injections? By the way, can I see him?"

She glanced at the appointment pad. "If you don't stay too long. Mr. Cooper's coming at eleven-fifteen to talk about that Hoenisch deal, and he's very anxious to get it settled."

Dick reached in his pocket, adroitly palmed the still-damp feather, and still wondering how he was going to plant it, slid past her desk. As he put his hand on the doorknob of the inner office, she said, "Oh, wait a minute. Would you mind handing him this? It just came back from the repair shop." She was hold-

ing out a gold-mounted fountain pen.

Mentally Dick gulped, remembering what Marion had said: "—something belonging very intimately to him." Apparently the working of her spell included opportunity with performance. Physically he took the pen with the hand that already held the feather, twisted the cap loose with one rapid motion of his conjurer's fingers, inserted the bit of fluff and replaced the cap as he opened the door.

The Elephant, who was anything but elephantine in appearance, looked over demi-lune glasses. "Thank you," he said as Dick handed him the pen, and pocketed it. "Now what seems to be the trouble?"

"It's that Sabaudo order for Murphylene," said Dick. "They've made it a condition of the order that they be furnished with the formula so they can run tests on each lot as it comes through. But the Murphy people will only let us have the formula to make our own tests and if we'll agree not to pass it on."

Oliphant said, "I can't say I blame them. They don't want their product being pirated in Brazil."

"That isn't all there is to it, sir," said Dick. "I don't know whether Sabaudo intends to pirate or not, but they have a

certain amount of justification on their side. Murphylene is undoubtedly one of the best detergents in the world today, if not *the* best, but the lots tend to run uneven, and a poor lot will spoil in a hot climate. One of those we sent to Sabaudo did. And we don't want to antagonize them, either."

Oliphant drummed with his fingers. "It can't be tested without the formula? I should think a good chemist—"

Dick said, "I've studied a good deal of chemistry myself, and I wouldn't want to try it. You can analyze and get the basic components, as I suppose most of Murphy's competitors have been doing. But that doesn't tell you how the components are put together, whether a given carbon atom is bonded to a given hydrogen atom. If you know how the stuff was put together in the first place, you know where to look for trouble."

"I see." The Elephant leaned back in his chair—it was odd how executive's chairs never squeaked—placed the tips of his fingers together and looked over his lunettes again. "The proposition has been up before, but I think that with the increase in our business, the time has come to make a change. I have about decided that in view of the repetition of such incidents we

need a testing department of our own, and I think you should head it up. Are you willing?"

Dick felt himself swaying in his chair. "There's nothing I'd like better," he managed to say.

"Good. Enthusiasm for the job you're doing is the best guarantee that you'll do a good job. I'll give you one assistant to begin with, but don't be afraid to call on me for more if the work load gets heavy. That is, don't try to do everything yourself to show how good you are. Now on this Murphylene matter—I don't suppose you can get your own laboratory set up in time to make the tests yourself, so I suggest you handle it this way. Write to Sabaudo and ask them whether they'll accept our test and guarantee, explaining that the product is a secret process job they want to keep secret. Then get the formula from Murphy and rent some time in a commercial laboratory to run the test. Only be careful that formula doesn't get out."

Dick stood up. "Thank you," he said.

The Elephant waved his hand. "You can talk with Stein about what kind of equipment you need and how big a space. I'll take care of the salary question." He shoved the Sabaudo papers across the desk.

It had worked. It had indubit-

ably worked. Treading on air as he went out to call up Candy with the good news, Dick paused only to advise Miss Christie, "Ask him for anything you want today; he's in a good mood."

It was not until he had conferred with Stein, the comptroller, about setting up the laboratory that the sober second thought came to him that this sudden good fortune might not represent the working out of a magic spell after all. Along with it, a thought that had been nudging at the back of his mind rose to the surface—Marion Saxon had spoken of "your new department" as though she knew all about it, though it occurred to Dick that he himself had barely mentioned the matter. And she had most certainly tripped him into an acquaintanceship. She lived alone and was well supplied with money, at least to judge from the look of the place. And she definitely wanted the Murphylene formula, which would be worth a good deal to someone like Atlas Soaps. Dick was not the kind of person inclined to dramatize himself or his surroundings, but the phrase "industrial espionage" rose to his mind.

Walter Oldman at least knew her from a distance, so it was not improbable that she had

some pipe-line to the area around the Elephant. So she might have learned of his intention to set up the department before he was ready to announce it to Dick. Twenty-four—no, about thirty-six hours would be enough.... No, dammit, the sincerity, even the seriousness, with which she spoke about real magic couldn't have been illusion—

At the next desk, the sharp rise in Oldman's voice called him back to reality. "—Dun and Bradstreet ratings!" he was saying. There was a pause. Oldman said into the phone, "At least why don't you let me try to contact someone in the State Department? We could hold up—" He stopped, then laid down the phone and turned to Dick. "I'll be eternally and teetotally damned!"

"Probably," said Dick, "and for adequate reason. But what makes you think so right now?"

"Cooper!" said Oldman explosively. "Do you know about that ball-bearing deal? A hundred tons of ball-bearings!"

"I didn't work on it, but I would have a natural suspicion of anything Cooper had a finger in. He's got a lot of good connections in Europe, but they're so good he thinks like a European business-man, which for my money is one who's just as crooked as he thinks he can get

away with. What has Cooper done now?"

Oldman said, "This one is worse than usual. He worked out a deal for the sale of a hundred tons of ball-bearings to Hoenisch of Zürich in Switzerland, at premium prices, no less. That alone ought to make anyone suspicious, because why should Hoenisch pay premium American prices, when premium European are lower than normal American?"

"What is it—black market deal?"

"Yeah. Ball-bearings are strategic, and Zürich is a free port. Those ball-bearings will go right straight through the Iron Curtain. It's illegal and dangerous to us, and a dirty piece of business beside. I didn't have to spend ten minutes explaining to the boss the other day. Well, that was him on the phone just now. Cooper's just been in to see him, and he's reversed himself. The ball-bearings are going. Told me to draw up the manifests, and wouldn't hear of anything else."

"That's strange, all right," said Dick, gazing at him.

"You're damned right. It's more than strange, it's freakish. Especially when you remember how the Elephant usually is about making up his mind and sticking to it. Damn!"

He applied himself savagely to the papers on his desk, while a trickle of something ran around Dick's mind. He, too, had been the beneficiary of an unexpected change of mind on the Elephant's part. What if—

" 'Scuse me, Mr. Bentress."

It was the office porter and handy-man, with a screwdriver. Dick stood up to let him pass. "What goes on, Arthur?"

"Gotta git at that window. The boss man done says he wants it open."

"Wants it open! You can't have open windows with an air-conditioning system running. You'd be trying to air condition the whole Eastern seaboard."

Arthur turned round, shaking his head. "Dunno," he said. "I guess the boss man kind of changed his mind about that air-conditioning. He call me in and say he don't want it no more, and I should turn her off and go round and open up all the windows."

"What ever for?"

"Seems like it makes some people sick around here."

The trickle at the back of Dick's mind swelled to a torrent. Miss Christie. Had she said something to the Elephant about it? He suddenly had to know, and picked up the phone. "Miss Christie, please."

The switchboard girl said,

"There's a call for you just came in, Mr. Bentress. Will you take it first?"

"Put them on., Hello. Bentress speaking."

The voice that came along the wire was so low he could barely hear it, without making out the words. "Hello," he said. "Hello. Can you speak a little louder, please?"

It was still low, but punctuated with desperate urgency, and he recognized it. "Mr. Bentress—Dick! Get it back. It's draining me."

"I'll try. When can I see you?"

"Not—soon. I'll call you. It's—draining—me."

The wire was dead. He clicked for attention.

"Waiting? Through?" came the voice of the operator. "Do you want Miss Christie now?"

"Never mind. I'll see her instead." Dick grabbed at random for a handfull of papers and made for the Elephant's office.

He was in luck. The boss was standing by Miss Christie's desk, hat in hand, with the evident intention of going out.

Dick said, "Beg pardon, Mr. Oliphant, but there's one detail of this Murphy—"

The boss made a gesture of brushing aside. "Bring it up later, will you, Bentress? I'm just on my way to have lunch

with my wife. I suspect that it's a prelude to a shopping tour, but you can't refuse anything to a woman, can you?" He smiled.

Dick felt little beads of perspiration gather and trickle down his front. "Oops," he said. "I see I haven't initialled that changed clause in the contract. Will you let me take your pen for a second? I've left mine at the desk."

Oliphant handed it over wordlessly, and as Dick took the cap off, his quick conjurer's fingers extracted and palmed the bit of fluff. He made a meaningless initialling, and handed back the pen. "Thanks."

As the boss turned to go, Miss Christie reached out a detaining hand. "Did you hear that?" she said in a low voice.

"Yes," said Dick. "What's the matter?"

"He hates going to lunch with his wife, and he hates shopping. As long as I've been with Allied, I've never know him to do it before. And he's been doing other things he hates this morning, even if some of them were nice." Her thin, proper secretary's face was tense. "I'm worried about him having a nervous breakdown or something."

"Don't let it get you down yet," said Dick. "He's likely to

make a snappy comeback this afternoon."

IV

Her phone didn't answer.

He had a date with Candy that evening and couldn't check up personally in Cliffside, which was too bad, because his thoughts kept wandering and the date ended up as a considerable failure. The next day was Friday, and he had hoped to slip away a little bit early, but the hope went to wreck when Stein and the contractor showed up just at 4:30 to talk about the layout of the new testing lab, and kept him so late he didn't even have time for a shower before grabbing something to eat and making Candy's concert.

So it was Saturday morning when a taxi deposited him at 321 Summit. The doorbell didn't answer either.

Dick punched the button marked *Supt.*, and after a decent interval was rewarded by the appearance of a rather small man badly in need of a shave.

"I'm looking for Miss Saxon," he said.

"Two-B. It's on the list," said Supt., and looked unfriendly.

"She doesn't answer."

"Maybe she ain't home."

This was getting nowhere. Dick produced a dollar bill.

"Look," he said. "I'm not one of these skip tracers or anything. I'm a friend of Miss Saxon's, and I've been trying to reach her for three days, and she doesn't answer the phone or anything. Have you seen her come in or go out?"

Supt. scratched the back of his head. "Now you mention it, I guess I ain't." He appeared to ruminate. "I ain't seen anyone coming for her either, but I wouldn't usually."

Dick said: "I'm a little worried about her. The last time I talked to her on the phone, she didn't seem very well, and with her all alone there . . ." The bill changed hands.

"I get it," said Supt. "You want to check up. Just who are you, mister?"

Dick produced driver's license, club membership card, various other documents, at which Supt. peered, mouth open. "I guess it's all right," he said. "Let's go."

He led the way to the self-service elevator and along the hall to 2-B, where he pushed the button, banged the door several times and inserted his key. "Anybody here?" he called, as it swung open.

No answer.

Supt. pushed in, followed by Dick, and snapped on the light. The place looked lived-in, but not in the least disturbed. The

bird-bath still stood under its window; the sofa where she had sat was occupied by a magazine open, as Dick noticed, at the middle of a story. "Nobody here," said Supt. from the door of the bathroom. Dick stepped to the bedroom where he had waited for her. There was no one there, either, and the bed was made. Wait a minute, though; on the dressing table stood one of those little women's overnight bags, with a built-in vanity case. It was open; in it were neatly packed a few feminine things, but spread atop them, almost as though it had been flung, was a filmy nightdress. One of the bottles from the vanity lay on its side outside the case.

She had been intending to leave, but had left more rapidly than she intended, and she had left behind things that a woman would normally have taken. No purse, but she would have taken that anyway. But how soon after she called him? And why? And where?

"Ain't here. Satisfied, mister?" said Supt. from the door of the bedroom.

Dick reflected that if he had told the truth he would have said he was by no means satisfied. She wasn't his girl, he couldn't be held responsible for her or what happened to her; whatever she had done she had walked

into deliberately, and it was absurd to believe in the reality of her "real magic." But all the same, there had been a note of urgency in that "It's—draining—me," and it was somehow his fault. If only for allowing her to believe in his acceptance of her magic. To worshippers of voodoo the acceptance of the reality was as effective as the reality itself. She had exerted some kind of force, and—

No answer.

There remained no answer for six weeks, during which Dick and Candy discussed a tentative date for the wedding, and the office discussed the day the Elephant blew up, while Dick himself was in a whirl of activity as his new testing department came into being. The Elephant visited the place, frowned, and made no reference to the big day. The air-conditioning system remained off and the windows open, and it was summer and hot. Miss Christie was happy and the ball-bearing shipment went to Hoenisch of Zürich.

On the morning it began again, Dick's pulses gave a jump at the sight of a handwritten envelope firmly marked *Personal* on top of the pile of opened business correspondence on his desk. This would be it.

Dear Mr. Bentress: I'm sorry not to have been in touch with you since the interesting evening we spent together, but I have had a little trouble, and I'm still not very fit to be seen. Didn't things work out the way I said? If they did, and you're ready to carry out your part of the bargain, will you mail the formula to me at this address? I'll see you again soon—I hope.

*Sincerely,
Marion Saxon.*

The address was one on Jefferson Avenue, in a district almost completely commercial. Dick frowned at it, turned the letter over, made a snap judgment, called Records and asked for the Murphylene formula. When it arrived, he had a stenographer copy it out, sealed the copy in an envelope, marked it "Miss Marion Saxon" and put it in his pocket. He was, by golly, going to get to the bottom of this business, confront her and find out exactly what had happened. In the six weeks since the visit to the empty apartment he had reached the definite conclusion that coincidence would not explain everything, and since nothing else would either, there had to be a still unidentified X factor, just as you figured out the mechanical contrivance when a magician did a trick that

couldn't be accounted for by any normal manipulation. And Marion Saxon held the key to the X factor.

At quitting time he took a taxi to the Jefferson Avenue address. It was an old six-story brownstone, with the ground floor made into a combination news- and cigar-store, lettering on the windows of the second testifying to the fact that it was occupied by *Doralene Original Millinery*. The languid elevator man said nobody named Saxon lived there and maybe he ought to try the cigar store. The man behind the counter in that establishment said there wasn't any Miss Saxon there, either, but admitted she sometimes got mail there. An accommodation address. There wasn't any regular time when she came in. Period.

And it was a period this time. The details added up. She wanted her formula and no further contact—quid pro quo. She had done something for him and was breaking off—something Forteian. Maybe she was working for Atlas Soaps or somebody else, but this was it. He even determined to tell Candy about it—something he had avoided previously, because even if you are going to marry a girl, it provokes a certain amount of

irritation to tell her about a spectacular evening (and its spectacular consequences) spent with another girl. He debated the question with himself over dinner at the Montmartre, and since Candy was playing a concert in Boston, was still debating it at eleven over a Scotch and soda when the phone rang.

"Bentress speaking."

He had a good ear for voices. There was some subtle difference, but it was the same. "Thank you for the letter. You kept your promise."

He was going to marry Candy Evans and there was no reason why a thrill should run along his nerves. "All right," he said. "So we're even."

"Do you think so?" There was a slight lilt in her voice. "Wouldn't you like to know more?"

"About what?"

"Magic."

He had intended to get to the bottom of this. "Yes, I would. Can you tell me more—without sending me out of the room?"

"Yes."

"When can I see you?"

"Tonight if you like. Now."

"Where?"

"At my apartment. 321 Summit."

"But—but—" Dick stammered.

"I know. It's late, and it's at least an hour's taxi ride out to

Cliffside. Are you afraid of the dark?"

Another snap judgment. "I'll be there."

"Good-bye until you come." The phone clicked.

The thrill was due to danger, he decided as the cab swung across the Haffa Street bridge, though he could not quite focus what the danger was, whether it lay in the peril this girl held for his future with Candy or something deeper, darker behind her. All his experience, all his training cried out that it could not be the latter, yet. . . . He tipped the driver a quarter and turned toward the building.

She held out a cool hand at the door. "Hello, I'm glad you came." Her hair was up and there seemed to be something subtly different about her face. "Drink?"

"Yes, please. Can I get it?"

"You don't know where things are. Make yourself comfortable."

He picked up the book on the end-table beside the chair and noted with a minor shock that it was Burton's *Handbook of Inorganic Chemistry*. She was back in a minute with the glasses and sat down facing him.

Might as well take the offensive, Dick said, "Why did you hide out and then write to me?"

She said, "Don't be antagonistic. I need your cooperation, and

I'll tell you everything I can. I had to establish a bargaining relationship with you before I could go any farther."

"Why?"

"Because that's the way magic is. I told you it's always an exchange."

He could hardly take his eyes off her face. "All right, go on. There are a lot of things I want to know—why you called me that day at the office, for instance."

"Give me time." She sipped from her own glass and looked at him across the rim. "I'll try to take things in order. I come from another place."

"Where?"

"You can call it—Skoa. I can't describe it to you, except to say that there are white towers and music and carvings and people and we all know magic."

Dick said, "It sounds fascinating, even if I never heard of the place."

She appeared to take the interruption for a form of applause. "I knew you'd be interested. That's one of the reasons I chose you—because you have an active mind. Do you remember the other time you were here, I told you about every bit of magic costing a person something? Well, the losses get to be simply terrible, so we have to find ways of reducing them. And you have a lot of things that

can reduce the losses, like Murphylene."

Dick said, "Accepting your thesis for the moment, how does Murphylene help?"

"Didn't I give you a wet feather? It's very hard to get a feather really wet, and it takes a lot out of one unless you have something like that. And we need it to see, too, in the pool."

"I don't understand that."

She smiled. "I can't quite explain to you yet, all of it. But you can see the part about the feather. If the spell is to work, the person it's being put on must be in contact with the feather."

She was giving him every chance to make objections, he realized. She must really want cooperation. "Go on," he said.

"We have these awful losses in personal capital, and—"

He held up a hand. "Just a minute. I have a question. You told me it would cost you something to get me the department, and then you called and said it was draining you or something. Tell me about it."

Marion Saxon shuddered slightly. "I didn't know. It was a spell that would make whoever you put it on do what you wanted, but I didn't know. The effect must last longer or be stronger than it is with us, or something. I knew when you got the depart-

ment you wanted. I could feel the shock, and I was only sick to my stomach and began to think of eggs, and so I knew I wouldn't ever eat eggs again. But that was all right, and about what I expected, and I knew that it would really help him, too, so I wouldn't lose anything more. But then a few minutes later I had an awful shock, and was terribly sick, and I knew it was working again, and this time it was something that would harm him, and I knew it would cost me a lot. It wasn't long after that I felt it again, and it was a bad one again. That was when I called you, and even then I knew I would have to have help. When I got another shock, I ran out of the house quick and went to a hospital. That's all."

Dick said, "I'm really sorry. I didn't know—"

She said, "It doesn't happen that way with us. This one kept going on and on until you got the feather back. I was in the hospital, and they said I had peritonitis and something called Vincent's angina, both at once, and I lost most of my teeth. That's one of the reasons I couldn't see you before."

Dick said, "All I can do is repeat how sorry I am. But look here, if magic hits you so hard, why do you have to do it?"

She looked at him as though

the question were childish. "Why, everyone does it. And I want a first in music, and how can I get it if all the rest are using magic and I'm not?"

"But if Murphylene will give you an edge on them, why do you need the formula? Why not just pick up a bottle here whenever you need it?"

"Don't you see? I got here with magic, and by the time I get back, I won't be able to make another trip. Not unless I can find some way to cut my loss in capital, or have something to trade to somebody else."

"Your own chemists?"

"We don't have any, really, not the way you have. When there's magic, those techniques don't have a chance to develop. Ours never did. That's why I came to you."

Dick finished his drink and set the glass down. "Yes. I see. A few minutes ago, you came to me because I had an active mind. Now I want to know why me, specifically? There are several thousand other people with more technical knowledge, and especially about Murphylene."

She leaned forward and the silk dress emphasized that she was mammalian. "Really, I'm serious and not trying to deceive you. I chose you because you're with that Allied firm, and you can get at a lot of different

things. And because you're a magician, and ought to be willing to bargain for what I can offer. Look, I've done something for you, and you've done something for me. Now I can teach you magic, and I want something in exchange. Not just Murphylene."

Dick considered and decided to play the line out. If he could come up with something that would really baffle the carnival of the Society of Amateur Magicians it might be worth a little. They were usually sharper at catching the trick than the professionals.

"All right," he said. "Suppose you teach me how to do magic. What do you want in return? Or can't you tell me, as with the spell?"

"I can tell you. This isn't a spell, it's a bargain and wouldn't be affected. I want two things; I want a Randall Geiger counter and the formula for Combarone."

Dick felt the skin on his face drawing tight. If she had gone over the whole list of items handled by Allied, she couldn't have selected two more touchy ones. The Randall Geiger counter was the very latest pocket-sized, high-efficiency instrument developed by the A. E. C., exported under license only to the most trusted officials of the most

trusted governments. And Combarone was the new borone lubricant that kept planes working smoothly at supersonic speeds, stratospheric altitudes and sub-zero temperatures. He said, "How do you know about those things?"

She gave a little laugh. "You forget I know magic. That's how I picked you out—from Skoa."

"And what do you want them for?"

"It's very simple. They're what you called capital-saving devices. A Geiger counter is one thing with you, but with us it gives warning that someone is putting a spell on you, in time to do something about it. And with Combarone on your feet you can draw more from the earth-currents, and make magic with less effort and expense. You'll find out when you do it."

"No I won't." Dick stood up. "My job wouldn't be worth a nickel if I gave you secret government projects like that, and even if it were, there isn't money enough in the world to make me do it. The answer is no and no again."

She had risen too, and was standing leaning back with her hands on the edge of the bird-bath. Now she sighed. "I'm sorry it has to work out this way," she said. "I hoped it would be different. Well . . ." She came

forward and extended her hand in farewell.

Their palms touched, and a multi-million volts suddenly ran through every nerve of his body. Either he was staggering or the room swirling around him; in a flash of dreadful and wonderful illumination and desire, he knew there was nothing he would not do to have and hold this woman. He gripped her to him in a long, breathless kiss and a damp feather fluttered to the floor.

As he carried her into the bedroom, he noticed that her ears were pointed. They hadn't been before, but it didn't matter now.

V

The last notes of the Beethoven triple concerto reached their harmonious climax and died on a sea of applause. Candy Evans, smiling and a little flushed, stood between her fellow soloists, glancing from one to the other and bobbing her sleek blonde head in recognition, while in the background the members of the orchestra began to pack up their instruments. As seats began to click up, she turned to put her own violin into its case and old Kákay, the conductor, was standing over her.

"You were most good, miss," he said, "but the rendition was not that of a happy woman. Will you tell Papa Kákay what gives?"

She shook her head, closing the snaps of the violin case, and her lips tightened. "It's all right," she said. "Just a mood. We all have them. But thanks for offering to help."

She almost ran off stage to the dressing room. So it was noticeable, it had been noticed. She hoped that Walter Oldman, who would be waiting at the stage door, wouldn't notice it too. Given half a chance he could make problems, but he was the best available substitute for Dick at the quiet chat over a drink which seemed to be necessary to relax her nerves after a concert.

He was waiting, looking very smooth and competent under his brush-cut. "Let me take the gut-box," he said. "You were tremendous tonight. Where will it be—Montmartre?"

The Montmartre was where she always went with Dick. She gave a little shiver. "No—let's go somewhere else tonight."

"All right. I know of a little Italian place."

Neither one of them said anything more until they were seated across from each other, with drinks on the blue-and-white

checked tablecloth. Then it was Walter who spoke. "Candy, there's something I've been meaning to say to you, and now is about as good a time as any. I'm a little worried about Dick."

"In what way?" Her fingers traced patterns on the cloth.

"He's been doing some—peculiar things, and I thought maybe you could find out what's back of it and—well, straighten him out."

"What do you mean? Isn't he doing all right in the testing department?"

"He's doing very well indeed. It isn't that." He hesitated a moment, frowning. "I'd better tell you the whole story. There's a detergent named Murphylene, made by a secret process in Pittsburgh. We got an order for it from a firm in Brazil, provided we'd furnish them with the formula, because the batches of the stuff weren't uniform. Well, the Murphy people wouldn't go that far, but they agreed to let us have the formula to make our own tests, and then we'd guarantee each batch. They gave it to us. Just by accident I found out that Dick had one of the girls make a couple extra copies of the formula."

Candy said, "I don't see anything alarming in that. Maybe he wanted to use them in the testing department."

"In what way? I wouldn't have thought anything of it either, but for a couple of other things. One of them was that one of our European representatives got an order for ball-bearings from a firm in Switzerland. Now, I'm perfectly sure this firm is black marketing right through the Iron Curtain, and ball-bearings are one of the things they pass through. Mr. Oliphant agreed that the order should be refused.

A few days later he turned right around and accepted the order and let them go. And that morning Dick was with Mr. Oliphant for a long time."

Candy said, "This is silly. What are you trying to say?"

"It isn't silly. I wouldn't have thought of it but for the business about the Murphylene, and then there's something else, too. We export a product named Combarone, a very special lubricant for the Air Force, and highly secret. Of course, Dick has to test it. Well, I found out that the other day Dick had one of the stenographers run off a copy of the formula and process of manufacture for that, too."

"But none of these things are important," protested Candy. "How do you know he had anything to do with the ball-bearings? And he may have just

wanted those copies for his department."

"I know," said Walter. "It doesn't sound important. But it's like ciphers. One correspondence doesn't mean anything, but when you get up to three points of identity, it begins to look as though you had something."

Candy said slowly, "What do you think you've got? And what do you want me to do?"

"You know Tim Hurst, don't you? Why don't you ask him to look around, just quietly? With his F. B. I. connections, he could—look around quietly, without doing anything official. I don't want it official when there's a chance of my being wrong."

"I see." Candy lowered her head for a moment, then raised it to look at him. "Tell me," she said. "That can't be all there is to it. There's another girl involved somewhere, isn't there? Because I know it, even though you're always the last to find out. I know something's wrong, and that's the only thing it could be. He's been behaving as though he were under an enchantment lately. He sits and looks at me for a long time and doesn't say anything. And when I talk about some things—"

Walter said, "What sort of things? Let's get it on the line if we're going to discuss this as

a pair of Dick's friends."

"All right, I will. He changes the subject when I talk about our plans for getting married. And Sunday, when we were supposed to go look at apartments together, he said he had some extra work to do at the office, and—and I'm afraid I didn't believe him. And he acts sort of—cold toward me. And tonight is the first time he hasn't even come to one of my concerts or sent flowers or anything." She was at the verge of tears, and Walter reached across to put one of his hands over hers.

Candy gulped and went on. "I know. I can see. You know Tim Hurst almost as well as I do, and you could ask him to look it up yourself. But you're just afraid Dick is mixed up in something terrible, probably with this other girl, whoever she is, and you want me to find it out from Tim. Isn't that it?"

Walter Oldman said, "I'm afraid it's something like that, Candy. I wish it weren't. You see—"

"You might as well tell me. I'm grown up."

"There wasn't anyone working at the office Sunday. But that isn't the only thing. You see, I live out in Cliffside. It's a good deal of a gossip's paradise, like most suburbs, and with

two sisters, I'm strategically placed to get the full charge. Now I don't want to put too much trust in gossip, because when it isn't deliberately malicious, it's usually inaccurate, but from what I can distill out in this case, I'm pretty sure that Dick has been seeing a good deal of our local mystery girl."

"What's she like? Is she nicer than me?"

Walter said, "You know I have always thought there was nobody nicer than you, and I've told you so. But she's—well, spectacular. Enough so that gossip about her is rather an obvious thing. Nobody seems to know where she comes from or what she does."

Candy put both hands to her face. "So now I know. I've often wondered what a girl would do if something like this happened to her, and now it's happening to me. Well, I know what I'm going to do." She gave a short, bitter laugh. "I'm not going to let her get away with it. I'm going to make her give him back."

"There's another solution. You could always make a play with me. It might make him jealous."

Candy said, "No. I'm not going to pretend, Walter. I've got to work this out for myself and by myself, and I don't think I want Tim Hurst or anyone else

mixed up in it." She stood up. "Don't try to take me home, will you? I really want to think this out alone. And thanks for the drink."

She extended a hand to him and was gone. He stood looking for a minute after she had passed through the door. Then he went to the phone booth, put in his coin and dialled a number. When it answered, he said, "Mr. Tim Hurst's apartment, please."

VI

The living room of Candy's apartment was tiny, but she had furnished it with taste and skill. Just now she was in the big wooden chair under the light, next to the window. Across from her on the sofa sat Walter Oldman and a rather nondescript looking dark young man who would be Tim Hurst. Facing them, and at Candy's left with the little occasional table between, was Dick Bentress. From the street outside rose the complex of sounds that made up the night life of the city, and it was hot. For a few moments no one said anything, and one could almost feel the mounting tension in the air.

Then Candy brushed one hand over her hair and said, "Dick, I asked Walter to bring Tim over tonight, because—well, because

he's been investigating some funny things that have happened and—and we thought maybe you could—could help him."

Dick fumbled in his pocket for a cigarette and matches. She could see he was a little white around the lips. "Am I being asked to furnish an explanation?" he said, and blew smoke through his nose.

Candy said, "I wish you wouldn't take it that way, Dick. I'm really concerned about you, and I think Walter is, too. Please believe me."

Dick said, "All right. What is it you inquisitors want?" He seemed to be trying to smile, but not quite succeeding.

Walter said, "This isn't an inquisition and you can stop it any time you please by simply not saying anything. After all, this isn't a court. We just want your help in tracing who's responsible for a couple of things. That's all. The first one is what became of the copy of the Murphylene formula you had made. It doesn't seem to be in any of the files at the office."

"Oh, that," said Dick. He took a half-dollar from his pocket, tossed it in the air, caught it, caused it to walk across the back of his hand and disappear.

"Yes, that," said Walter. "Next, can you help us find

the extra copy of the Combarone formula and process description? That seems to be missing, too."

"Go on," said Dick. He was making the half-dollar do tricks.

"And who persuaded the Elephant to let the ball-bearing shipment go through to Hoenisch?"

"And why you took one of the Randall Geiger counters out of the shipment that came in today and put it in your desk before you came out here."

"Did I?" said Dick.

"Yes, you did. I picked it out myself, and I have it here." He produced the instrument and held it up.

Candy saw him frown quickly and then his face set in new lines. "All these things have a perfectly good explanation, which I'll give you in a minute," he said. "But I want to know the full extent of what I'm charged with, and why." He glanced from Walter to Candy and back again.

"You aren't charged with anything," said Tim Hurst. "And the next question is mine. My office is interested in a girl named Marion Saxon. We can't find out a thing about her, not even where she comes from, and as we understand you have seen something of her, we thought you might be able to help."

This time Candy saw the slow

red come up Dick's face. He articulated, "Why is your office interested?"

Hurst said, "I don't think I want to answer that at present. But you might be able to guess in view of the fact that both Combarone and the Randall counter are classified materials, Murphylene is a secret process, and the ball-bearings went to Iron Curtain countries without any question."

Dick laughed. "You have quite a case, haven't you? So you think Miss Saxon is a beautiful spy, charged with pumping me for ball-bearings and detergents for use of the Russians? Let me tell you, you couldn't be more wrong if you tried. Yes, there is an explanation for all these things, or rather for each of them, and I'll give it to you. But first, excuse me for a minute, I want to use your bathroom, Candy."

After the door had closed behind him, Oldman turned to Hurst. "What do you think?" he said.

Hurst produced a handkerchief and mopped a steaming brow. "From my experience in handling questioning," he said, "I'd say we were onto something, but not quite the right thing. That isn't the way they behave when you have them dead to rights."

From her corner Candy said,

"Oh, I hope not—", and stopped.

"Cigarette?" said Walter.

"Not me," said Hurst. "Even that much more heat near me would put me in a snit to-night."

The bathroom door opened and Dick emerged, carrying a glass of water. As he crossed the room, he stumbled, took a staggering step and came down, the water spilling on Walter and Hurst.

"Oh, damn!" he said. "I'm dreadfully sorry."

Candy was on her feet, hurrying to the kitchen and coming back to minister with towels. "No real damage," said Walter. "Even good on a hot night like this."

"Let me get you another glass," said Candy. "Less chance for accident."

Dick took the place he had left, his hand going up to his face. "Ouch," he said.

"What's the matter?"

"The punishment fitted the crime," he said. "I broke a couple of teeth in that comedown. . . . Well, now about those points you wanted to be enlightened on. It was Cooper who persuaded the boss to send the ball-bearings, don't you remember, Walter? You told me so yourself. I had nothing whatever to do with it. *You forget.*"

"I—" began Walter. He hesitated a moment, and then said,

"Of course you're right. I did forget."

Dick said easily, "Now about the copy of that Murphylene formula. Of course it isn't in the files. Why should it be? It's a secret process. But don't you remember that combination-lock file just inside the office to the testing lab? You ought to remember that day before yesterday, when you were in there yourself, I was showing you some things, and that was one of them."

Walter slapped his knee. "I do remember now. You spoke about it at the time, and I forgot."

"The other formula, the Combarone, had to be written out to accompany that shipment to the Greenland air base. You know how fussy the Air Force is about those things."

"So they are. It never occurred to me that it was official."

"And the Randall counter—hand it over here, will you?"

Walter took the device from his pocket as Dick stepped toward him. "Why, it's making a noise!" he said. "I must be radioactive."

Dick took it. "That's funny," he said. "But that isn't the regular sound it makes—more a soft purr, like the winding of a clock. But if you're radioactive, so am I. I doubt whether it's

dangerous. Anyway, if you'll look here, you'll see the set screw on this side is defective. That's why I took it out of the lot—to get it fixed before shipment. It's so small a job that I thought we could do it right in the lab."

"May I see it?" said Candy suddenly.

Dick handed it to her. The machine stopped its peculiar purring. "I don't see—" she said. "Oh, yes."

He accepted the return of the counter, dropped it in his pocket and resumed his seat. "As for Marion Saxon, she's just someone I met by accident—what's the matter?"

He had turned to Tim Hurst, who was sitting with his mouth partly open, staring at vacancy. Now he swallowed and passed a hand across his face. "Can't—seem—to remember," he said slowly. "Guess this heat must be getting me—down."

"Do you want to lie down?" said Candy.

"No—be all right," he said, getting slowly to his feet.

"You ought to be home," said Dick, getting up.

Walter also rose. "I'll see that he gets there. And thanks a lot for being so decent about this, Dick. It was a good deal of an intrusion."

"That's all right," said Dick. "Misunderstandings can turn in-

to something unless they're cleared up. Wait a minute; you've got a piece of feather on your sleeve. There." He helped guide Hurst, who seemed to have recovered enough to walk straight, to the door.

Behind him Candy said, "Don't go just yet."

Dick started slightly, and came back to his place. When they heard the elevator door close outside, the girl said, "You tricked them, I don't know how you did it, but I've seen you work too often and I know your patter. And you can't trick me."

Dick said, "I'm not trying to, Candy. Believe me." She thought his voice had an edge of sadness.

"Then—no, I'm not going to ask you questions."

"About Marion Saxon, you mean? She's just—well, interested in magic—" His face was red.

"Stop it. I'm not going to ask you questions or even listen to explanations—now. I just wanted you to know that you needn't adopt any concealments or devices with me. That's all."

She was still fighting to hold back the tears as he went out the door.

VII

Candy undid her hair and sat down on the edge of the bed. It was all right to talk about

not slamming doors that might open on a reconciliation, and all right to do it, too, but it left one feeling hurt inside. Also there didn't seem at the moment to be anything practical that could be done to relieve the hurt. The idea of appealing directly to this—other girl was unattractive. So was that of merely continuing to do nothing; Dick hadn't called for two days now, not since the night Tim Hurst developed that attack of amnesia, right on the couch in her living room.

The phone rang. Candy jumped up and ran to it, but it wasn't him; it was somebody with a thick German accent who asked, "Is this the Miss Evans who plays the violin?"

"Yes."

"Here is Paul Schmitz. For you I have an offer of much interest."

"I'm afraid I'm pretty well booked up now."

"This is not an offer of booking. It is concerned with another field of your activity. If you are so kind to give me a few moments of your time."

"All right, I'm listening."

"I wish in person to speak with you."

"Well—all right. Where are you now?"

"Within ten minutes I am there."

"Make it fifteen, will you? I want to pick up."

Musicians get all sorts of offers. The last one had been as playing conductor of one of the lady-orchestras in Havana—but no, he said it didn't have anything to do with booking. So she was still wondering when he appeared at the door, a smallish man with a narrow face that didn't seem to go with his accent.

"Paul Schmitz," he said, and bowed. Rather good looking.

"Come in."

He took the place on the couch, sitting rather stiffly with his hands on his knees. Candy waited.

"You are the Miss Evans who is the affianced of Richard Bentrress?"

That hurt. Candy said, "I—I think I'm the one you mean. Does my being engaged to him have anything to do with the proposition you mentioned?"

"It is concerned because you are the only one to help him. He is under a spell."

She smiled a wan smile. "Yes, I suppose you could call it that. I'm afraid I'm not much interested in discussing it."

"Believe me most earnestly, Miss Evans, I speak not in literary terms. Mr. Bentrress is suffering under a powerful and genuine magical spell, and unless

he is relieved of it, the consequences are not good. Already Mr. Hurst suffers from a disease of the memory as a result."

Candy experienced a slight sense of shock. "You seem to know quite a lot. All right, you've got me interested. Go on."

"I am a magicker, a magic-teacher."

In the entertainment field you meet all sorts of charlatans and all sorts of crackpots they prey on. Candy reflected that they usually backgrounded themselves pretty well before starting an operation. "I see," she said. "And you want to take the spell off him, I suppose. For how much? No, I'm afraid I'm not much interested."

Paul Schmitz' voice was patient. "You are not understanding," he said. "Payment I certainly ask, because it is one of the rules of procedure, but your money is not useful. Also, I do not wish to make a spell, but to teach you how to make one to recover your man. How can I convince you this is so?" He looked around. "Ach! give me your musical instrument."

Candy stepped across the room and took her violin from the case. Paul Schmitz handled it carefully, but with fingers that showed he was familiar with the technique; tucked it

under his chin, drew the bow once across the strings, adjusted one of the tuning pins, and said, "Now I will show that I am of good heart," and began to play.

It was like nothing Candy had ever heard, and after the first few bars she was sure it *was* nothing she had ever heard; it began with a theme set forth in a slow, almost stately passage, then adding another, quicker theme to the first, and another to that, weaving the three together in a marvellously intricate tracery that soared and sang. The kind of music that Schubert might have composed if he had lived. The kind that needed no words to appeal directly to the emotions. And marvellously played; she had heard Heifetz and Elman, and this man was surely better than either at their best.

She relaxed and let the music flow over her. It was trying to say something to her personally, she was experiencing a sense of grief and loss among the crystalline notes, but underneath, the third theme was insisting that the loss was not forever, the grief had surcease, and then with a sudden warning note that said *Danger—danger—danger*, it swept on past to a triumphant climax and ended.

Candy clapped her hands. "That really was marvellous,"

she said, "but what was it?"

Paul Schmitz handed her the violin. "With my own instrument I could do better," he said. "It is only something I made up to say how it is with you and your affianced. Also that you can do for him what is necessary and it will have good consequences."

Candy was beginning to think that she could believe anything if a composition like that was impromptu. She said, "There was something in there that seemed to say it was dangerous, or am I wrong?"

Paul Schmitz had taken his place again. Now he made a kind of little bow where he sat. "You are most right, Miss Evans. It is both dangerous and costly to make spells which affect the will of another person, especially to counteract another and very strong spell. This is why I am coming to you. I could myself do it, but I have made so much magic I am not sure I could afford it."

"I don't quite understand."

He considered a moment, then jumped up. "Wait; I will show. Your bathroom is where?"

"First door, over there."

He disappeared through it, and she heard the sound of running water, then a silence for two or three minutes, then a vague tinkling sound, like that of far-away bells. Paul Schmitz

appeared in the doorway. "Come," he said.

She stepped to the doorway. "Look," he said, pointing at the washbowl.

It was filled with something that did not quite seem to be water, because there was a milky haze in it, swirling rapidly yet without eddies, smooth on top. There seemed to be something else in it; she bent over and caught an indistinct picture of streets and white towers and people moving.

Paul Schmitz said, "Have you one of these so-strong liquid soaps?"

"Will this do?" She handed him her bottle of shampoo from the shelf.

"I could clear it without this, but already the magic gives me a headache, though it is a small one and not personal."

He emptied some into the bowl. The swirling seemed to cease and Candy gave a little cry as the picture cleared and she saw as though reflected in a silver mirror the image of a town all built in some white stone, with towers and graceful porticoes and trees with bright green leaves among the buildings. Paul Schmitz passed his hand across it; the picture became a close-up; she was as if standing next to a building whose flat wall was carved in an

elaborate design of lions in lily fields, looking across a street where men in pocketed tunics and women in long gowns went past. Most of them wore their hair long, but there was one man totally bald and a woman who had no fingers on one hand. "That is from too-heavy spells," said Paul Schmitz at her side. He plunged his hand into the enchanting picture, which immediately became a bowl of rather soapy water again, wiped it on a towel and led the way back into the living room.

"Now we talk," he said. "That is Skoa, where I come from."

"Beautiful," said Candy, "but where is it?"

"It is not a place at all in your world, but side by side." He sighed. "I tell you it. Many years ago our people like yours had a few witches and magic-makers, but where you put them down, we honored them and let them study until they learned the laws of magic as your people have learned to control the physical world. But for us this was unnecessary, since many things were done by magic."

"I see," said Candy.

"So it is by magic we became aware of other worlds, and could see them, and also reach them if one is willing to pay for it, but this is hard, because for every magic you give something

of yourself and soon you are dead. If I go back now, I perhaps lose a leg or the similar, and it goes also if I remove the spell from your affianced."

Candy frowned. "If it's as bad as that, I don't see why you came here at all. Or why you're offering to teach me magic so I can do it."

He lifted one finger. "Ach! There are times when one cannot be altogether safe. I tell you it. With us in Skoa, everything is music; we make music day and night, and those who make the best are honored, as with you the cinema or the President. Good. Now there is a girl named Rualla of Liphor, I give her her Skoan name, very ambitious in music but not so talented that she can obtain all she desires, so that the only way she can win a high place in music is by magic."

"I should think that would be rather like cheating," said Candy.

"Completely not. If the music is beautiful, how does it matter how it is made? Also, this Rualla is ambitious in other ways. She would like to obtain many things, having to give in exchange, since money is little used by Skoans, and only for small things. Good. But if she makes a magic powerful enough to give her great success in

music, it will injure her so badly that she cannot achieve anything else, since others also use magic and a strong spell is needed. Good. So it is that she knows of this world through the pictures as I have shown you and knows there are things here that we cannot make which will strengthen her spells or make them less costly to her. She chooses, then, a young man who can obtain these things and who is concerned with magic so that he will be willing to exchange these things for a knowledge of the laws of magic. This is your affianced." He smiled.

Candy said, "I don't see . . . Why didn't she just make the exchange, then? Why did she have to take him away from me?"

"Ach! I am thinking that there was some reason why he refused to exchange, so that she had to put him under a spell to make him do it. He was watched by the pictures when he came here with the two others and he had in his pocket a machine that indicated a spell. Also, he immediately put the two others under a spell. This is contrary to the rules of procedure. It is doubtful whether the Hurst will recover from his amnesia."ç

"And you—?"

"I am of the authorized police. Rualla is not allowed to do such

damage in other worlds. But he is bound to her by this spell now and if she returns to Skoa she takes him with her."

"So you want me to help."

"That is correct. But you must give me something for teaching you magic."

"What do you want?"

"Fifty meters of high-tensile steel wire."

The answer was so utterly unexpected that Candy laughed. "What in the world for?"

"If I go back—and you understand it is not yet a thing decided completely—this wire will become a part of my musical instrument. We have none such in Skoa, there are none who know how to make it. It will give my instrument such a tone that I am sure to obtain a first. But if I do not return, then I will have a Skoan instrument made here and play it. Also good."

Candy cradled her chin in her hand and considered. Then the absurd request won out.

"All right," she said, "I'm game. What do I have to do?"

VIII

The girl came over to the bench where Dick was operating the paper-testing machine. "There's a Mr. Schmitz outside to see you."

"What about?" said Dick, his eye on the meters and not turning around.

"He said it was personal. He doesn't look like a salesman or an insurance agent, though."

"Oh, all right." Dick turned off the machine and followed her. Probably an emissary from some manufacturer to ask that tests on his product be conducted in some special way that would show it at its best. They were always doing that.

The only person in the tiny reception office was a young man who looked pleasant enough in a Teutonic sort of way, and who confirmed his appearance by his accent.

"Mr. Bentress? I am charged to confer with you."

"All right, confer away."

"Let us sit down. Much time I do not wish to take, but—" He suited the action to the word, and Dick had no choice but to sit beside him. He contemplated Dick steadily. "I have acquaintance with Miss Evans," he said.

Dick experienced a slight choking sensation. It had to come sometime, he had recognized, because things couldn't go on like that. But he had meant to go to her and tell her honestly how it was and that there wasn't any more use trying to get away when something like that hit you than there was trying to make

the sun set in the east. She had beaten him to it, and he felt ashamed. "Yes?" he said.

"She is sending a something to you." He reached in his jacket pocket for a folding change-purse, in another pocket for a pair of tweezers, and before Dick could more than half formulate the thought that this was a hell of a way to send a man's ring back, produced a small wet feather and laid it on his hand.

For one breathless second Dick felt only the contact of the tiny bit of fluff; then the impact of the counter-spell rose up and hit him like a hammer. He gasped; the room seemed to whirl around him so that he gripped the sides of the chair. Schmitz was surveying him not unkindly. "It is always so," he said. "It will not last." He stood up calmly, walked over to the bank of elevators and pressed the button.

"Wait," Dick tried to articulate, but when he opened his mouth only a kind of bleat came out. Behind her glass, the receptionist - stenographer was staring at him curiously. The elevator door opened. "Good-bye, Mr. Bentress," said Schmitz. "Believe me, it is better so." He was gone.

Dick gathered himself together and with an immense effort, stood up. The floor still

seemed to be pitching slightly around him; he staggered, thinking it was no wonder the Skoans were reluctant to use full-power magic if it hit you this hard. Then that Candy must somehow have learned the spells; and then that what he had taken for a sudden and overwhelming passion for Marion had been a spell after all, and he had been under it. He didn't quite hate her now, but he didn't want to see her again either. As for Candy—

"Call for you on six," said the receptionist.

"I'll take it at the desk."

The familiar voice of Candy Evans floated along the wire. "Hello—Dick?"

"It's me, I guess. Look here—"

"Yes, I know. You feel better now, and I know why." Her voice had a faint quality of bitterness in it. "Never mind that now. I want you to do something for me."

"All right. What is it?"

"I want you to get me fifty meters of high-tensile steel wire."

"What!"

"Just what I say. Can you do it?"

"I suppose so, but—"

"I need it for something. 'I'll tell you about it— sometime.'"

Her voice still held that note of bitterness, aloofness, or something he couldn't quite analyze.

"Candy, I want to come out and see you tonight."

"Not tonight, Dick. Please."

"Why? You haven't a rehearsal, I know. Is it because of—"

"It isn't because of anything, and I'm not holding things against you. It's just that I had—a little accident. I don't want to see anybody for awhile."

He remembered with a thrill of fear that somebody would probably have to pay heavily for a counter-spell of the force that hit him, and that somebody would be Candy. "Listen," he cried, "what's wrong? What's happened?"

"Nothing that you need worry about. I need the wire quite soon. Good-bye, Dick."

The phone clicked. Dick Bentrass hung up, a prey to apprehensions. The backlash of the magic that had freed him must have hit her hard somehow. It was his fault; no it wasn't, he had been under a spell himself. And so on; no matter how he argued with himself he could not put down the feeling that he was responsible in some way for something unpleasant that had happened to Candy.

If so, he ought to do something about it. And the first step in that direction was finding out what needed to be done. Dick called up the order department,

had them make out a manifest for the fifty meters of high-tensile, papers to be sent to his desk, and as soon as they arrived, closed down his desk and took a taxi for Candy's place.

The downstairs lock clicked open, but when he pressed the button at the door of her apartment, it opened only a crack. "Who is it, please?" Her voice held the previous quality of coldness.

"It's me. Dick. I have the papers on your fifty meters of wire."

The door did not move and there was silence for a moment. "I don't want to see anybody right now."

Dick said, "Candy, let me in. There's something wrong and all I want to do is help you."

"I—oh, I suppose you might as well know now, as well as any other time."

The door was suddenly flung wide, and Dick suddenly was facing her. But it was a Candy shockingly and horribly different than the one he had last seen. A huge scarlet blemish involved the whole left side of her face from hair to chin like an open wound. He gasped.

"Now you know," she said in a little voice. "That's what it cost me, and you—you won't want me any more."

He gripped her by the shoul-

ders. "Look here," he said. "Even if you hadn't got that trying to help me out, I wouldn't let you down. You ought to know that, Candy. Can't something be done about it?"

She shook her head, looking at the floor. "I asked a doctor this afternoon. He said the only thing to do was cover it up with one of those creams or something."

Dick led the way into the living room and sat down on the couch with his arm around her shoulders while he kissed her. "Don't worry," he said. "I think I know a way to get rid of it."

Candy said, "If you mean magic, no, Dick. Paul Schmitz taught me about it. He belongs to the service that enforces the rules of procedure in Skoa. He says that there hasn't been any magic in the world for so long that the effect is doubled. Whatever you get out of it, you lose something that you want more. And look what happened to poor Tim Hurst. You made him forget, didn't you?"

Dick shuddered slightly. "I'm sorry. But they think he may be all right now. I called up to find out this afternoon after I . . . after I came out from under."

"Then you can see why we mustn't either of us have anything more to do with it. We don't really understand the

laws. And even the Skoans are afraid to use their magic here. Let it be."

"Listen," said Dick, "I—"

The phone rang.

As Candy twisted in his grasp to cross the room and answer it, he was on his feet and into the tiny bathroom. The bowl filled with a gurgle. He hadn't brought a feather with him, but the feather-duster in one corner ought to do, and as he worked out the sorites for a vanishing spell, he wrenched loose a small fragment and dumped into the bowl some of Candy's shampoo, which ought to be near enough to a detergent. The passes—one, and two, and three. The second sorites.

Behind him Candy said, "Dick! No!"

He dipped his hand into the slightly smoking water and turned to face her. "Here's your feather," he said and thrust it into her hand. Candy looked at it with horror stricken eyes.

For a moment they stood immobilized by the shock and counter-shock of the spell. Then Candy shrieked.

The vanishing spell had been up to specification, and the blemish had disappeared. So had her clothes. . . .

When a little order had been restored to the proceedings and Candy was seated opposite him in her second-best dress, she said, "Well, you got away with it. I didn't think you would. What did it do to you?"

Dick felt himself all over. "As far as I can see, not a thing. I don't seem to have lost any ears or anything, and I feel perfectly normal."

She said, "It just doesn't seem possible. Maybe you've accidentally hit on a way of keeping it harmless, and we're in business as genuine magicians. Let's go down to Bergman's steak house for dinner and talk it over."

"Ulp!" said Dick and put one hand to his mouth. "That's it. You're going to have a husband who gets sick to his stomach at the very thought of meat."

He fled for the bathroom.

Candy listened for a minute, then reached for a feather and a bottle of Murphylene. . . .

DE DEMON— NATUR—

BY WESLEY BAREFOOT

Demons have a habit of suiting themselves to the expectations of the beholders. To an agnostic, they'd have a bit of difficulty in presenting themselves. But the appearance of demons still obeys certain rules. . . .

It was like a pillar of mist, man-sized, and when it wavered and writhed toward the boundary of the pentagram Carnehan was afraid.

Even so, he managed to control his thinking, and to retain the faculty on which he most prided himself, his objectivity. The fear was isolated, compartmented, in this moment of triumph. Another part of his mind analyzed and evaluated, while still another reviewed the last few weeks.

The parchment had been in his Uncle Alec's scanty effects when a cerebral hemorrhage ended an undistinguished existence in a

space of minutes. It was a single sheet, stained, smudged with erasures, written in crabbed, archaic Latin. It was a wisp of the past, incongruous in twentieth century New York. It was—a gateway.

There had been a typewritten note paper-clipped to the parchment. Only a few words:

Dear Jim: Be careful with this thing. I was afraid to make use of it. Sometimes I think that perhaps I was too smart. In any event, when you read this, I will be dead, and it will be your problem. Best of luck. Your Uncle Al.

Latin was never his strong



point, he thought, watching the misty column. *De Demon-Natur-*, it was titled. He got that fairly easily. On the Nature of Demons. The rest was more difficult, with so many missing letters, and as for the final paragraph, the spell. . . . He knew by that time that a mistake would not be healthy.

The shimmering pillar seethed with unrest.

Careful, Carnehan, he thought, walk softly, no false steps. Weigh each statement.

There were words in the room, very ordinary, quietly pitched.

"What do you want, man? Why have you called me?"

Carnehan's voice was controlled, almost without inflection. "That can wait. First things first. Now, you *are* a demon, aren't you?"

"Yes, I imagine so, in the human sense of the word. Almost certainly so. I have never been a purveyor of what you would call good—that is, a thing or state that would be agreeable to the ego."

"Fair warning," said Carnehan softly. "It wasn't needed, but thanks anyway."

"It was required," said the nondescript, ordinary voice. There was a feeling of waiting.

"Why are you—mist? Would the reality be insupportable? Are you—?"

"And how should I be, Carnehan?"

"Why—I—I"

"You are confused because you are logical, Carnehan. Ambiguous? I'll explain. Imprimis, you can't see, or even imagine, my actuality. It's too—er—other worldly. As you yourself would say, P is not Q. Is that clear?"

"Go on," said Carnehan.

"Secundus, you therefore visualize an entity that is in accord with your basic metaphysical assumptions. As one of your species so aptly remarked, the universe—"

"—is, a joint product of the observer and the observed."

"Please don't interrupt, Carnehan. Your parents were agnostics, weren't they? I thought so. You aren't quite as riddled with metaphysics as some. Consequently, you see a cloud of whirling electrons, or something similar." The demon chuckled.

"Yes?" said Carnehan.

"Metaphysics!" the demon said amusedly. "I remember a certain noted theologian, circa 1250, who saw me as a young girl in a state of extreme deshabelle. And the Whig statesman who thought he was talking to the shade of a Tory prime minister, and who, furthermore, was not surprised. Why, man, there was a scientist just last year, in

theoretical physics, believe it or not, to whom I appeared completely equipped with horns and a tail."

The voice sharpened. "As you said, first things first. Now to business. Who do you want? I'm honestly hoping for a little originality this time, Carnehan."

"I would like," said Carnehan slowly, "to be able to take over the physical body and the memories of anyone I wish, while retaining fully my former ego and memories. And with no restrictions."

"With no restrictions," echoed the demon thoughtfully. "Well, that's not too difficult. There's a very simple spell that would be just right for you. It goes like this—"

"Wait," said Carnehan sharply. "On your word, no trickery?"

"That's twice you've interrupted. I don't like it." The tone was chill. "Trickery! We don't stoop to tricks. That tradition arose because men befouled themselves with their own stupidity, and then rationalized it. If you don't like the body you pick, choose another. Or return to the one you left. It will act normally for a day or two, by the way, and then die. That is, if you don't reinhabit it. I assume you've selected a candidate for your initial venture?"

Carnehan smiled grimly. "In-

deed I have." The thought of Soames was in his mind. Soames, still in his twenties, squandering his inherited millions. He remembered Soames at the benefit at the St. Regis, sneering at the bagpiper. What had he said? Oh yes. "It's an ill woodwind that nobody blows good." His little coterie of sycophants had dutifully roared with laughter. Useless parasites, all of them, and Soames was no better.

"Well, Carnehan?" The quiet voice from the column held a hint of impatience.

"The spell," said Carnehan. "Give me the spell."

"Repeat after me," said the demon. "O Serossa y Caliphas—"

"O Serossa y Caliphas," said Carnehan huskily. The words clogged in his throat.

"Clearly and distinctly, Carnehan, if you want efficacy. Enunciate. Now, again."

Ten minutes later he had learned it, and the pillar of mist was gone. Gone to the other—place. P that is not Q. . . .

"Come in," said the young man as he rose. "I'm very happy to meet any friend of Clyde Bancroft. You're probably a Yale man too, if you know Clyde."

Carnehan looked at the speaker. The young, confident, and so rich Austin Soames. He glanced

at the expensive rug, the paneling, the shelves of books, and drew a deep breath.

"I don't know Bancroft at all," he said, as Soames stood there, eyebrows raised. "O Serossa y Caliphas—"

There was a wrenching—

He stood still, looking at his old self, letting the newness sweep through him, the newness that had been Soames. The feeling of slenderness and youth, the touch of linen underclothing, strange yet well remembered. And the pain—

He dredged up the hateful memory, slowly. The ache, the physical irritation he had ignored for so long. Doctors were quacks. And then, suddenly, it couldn't be ignored, and

it was too late. Cancer, they said.

He swayed for a moment, steadying himself by a forced control, and then, suddenly, was again aware of the shell of Carnehan, of himself, standing there. A structure of flesh, smiling faintly, waiting to react in a semblance of rational action to a casual goodnight, or any other dismissal.

A wave of relief swept over him. He opened his mouth, and spoke.

"O Therotha y—"

His lips! His hated lisp, momentarily forgotten. Oh God! Just this once—!

The words formed again, desperately, prayerfully.

"O Therotha—"

The third time he screamed.

IT HAPPENED TOMORROW—

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The STRONGER SPELL

BY L. SPRAGUE DE CAMP

The strongest spell, of course, has always been death. Yet in all the accounts of early magic, death had to be produced by the most amazingly inefficient means. Still, magic has many forms. . . .

Dimly seen through an autumnal drizzle that made the cobblestones of its waterfront glow in the fading light, the city of Kernê—ancient, bustling, colorful, and wicked—brooded over the waters of the Western Ocean. The flying-fish flags of the city stirred in sopping folds from poles atop the watch-towers along the walls, where sentries paced and peered through the murk.

Along broad Ocean Street, as the waterfront was called, few folk moved in the dusk and water gurgled in the gutters. Most of the tubby roundships that carried Kernê's commerce and the slender galleys that protected it from the corsairs of the Gorgon Isles had been laid up for the season, hauled out of water into sheds along the beach south of

the waterfront proper. Hence few ships were using the quays and piers of Ocean Street except the usual scuttle of fishing craft, and most of these were sitting out the storm.

A two-horse chariot came plop-ploping by, its bronze tires banging harshly on the cobbles and its driver braced against the pull of the half-wild horses. The passenger was muffled to the eyes against the wet, but lights from the houses caught the golden trimmings of the vehicle and told that he must be one of the oligarchy of merchant princes.

Suar Peial, hugging a couple of bulky objects under his cloak, strode along the street, paying little heed to the questionable characters who peered out of doorways and alleys. These took



in Suar's stature and the slender scabbard visible below the cloak, and looked elsewhere for easier pickings.

A noise from an alley attracted Suar's attention. A glance showed a fight in progress. A man with his back to an angle in the wall was defending himself by kicks and the blows of some sort of club against an attack by five others. The looks of these latter, as tattered as the falling leaves of the cork oaks that lined Kernê's avenues, told Suar that they were typical thieves of the quarter.

A sensible man on the Kernean waterfront would walk swiftly away, pretending that he had seen or heard nothing amiss. But if Suar had been sensible he would not have been in Kernê in the first place. He would have been home in Zhysk across the Sirenian Sea; he might even have been king of Zhysk. As it was, the lone man was due to go down under the clubs and swords of his attackers in a matter of a few heart-beats. Even had he been twice as big and much better armed, he could not face five ways at once. If his cowardly assailants had been willing to risk a hard knock or two in closing, they would already have had him down.

Suar shucked off the cloak, made a bundle of the cloak and

the objects that he had been carrying, drew his slim bronze rapier, and started for the scene. As he went, he picked his first opponent—the one with the cudgel. Of the others, two carried short bronze broadswords and the remaining two, knives. With shield or armor, Suar would have had little to fear from the club, but lacking defenses he feared to fence with it, lest a wild swing snap his thirty-inch blade.

The man with the club turned at the sound of Suar's approach and sprang back. The other four backed away from their victim also, their attitude bespeaking imminent flight. Then he of the club said, "There is but one. Slay him too!"

He stepped forward himself, swinging the bludgeon. Suar did not try to parry; instead, his long knobby arms and legs shot out in a lunge that sent his point through the club-man's arm. Suar bounced back, trying to recover before the club arrived. He did not quite succeed. Although the blow went weak and awry because of the wound in the thief's arm, the wood still grazed Suar's scalp, scraped his right ear, and bounced off his right shoulder—a painful knock, but not a disabling one. Then the club clattered to the ground as its owner's grip failed.

As the man stood there, holding his wounded arm and staring stupidly, Suar's sword flicked out again like a serpent's tongue and the point pierced the thief's broad chest. The club-man, coughing a curse, folded up into the mud of the alley. As the others began to close in upon Suar, the latter shot a thrust at the nearest swordsman, who gave ground, then engaged one of the knife-wielders. The man tried to grab the blade with his free hand, but Suar avoided the clutch and thrust him through the body.

All this had taken as much time as an unhurried man would require to breathe thrice. At that instant a sharp sound drew the glances of all. The original victim had stepped up behind his nearest assailant and brought the club-thing down upon the latter's head with a mighty blow.

Then there were three thieves lying in the mud and two others fleeing. One of those lying in the alley still moved and groaned.

Suar looked at the man whom he had rescued. He could not make out much in the dim light, save that the man wore the tartan trousers and the sweeping mustache of the northeasterly barbarians. The man stood back, gripping his club-thing as if still doubtful of Suar's intentions.

"You may put that away, fel-

low," said Suar, straightening his blade. "No robber am I, but a mere poetaster."

"Who are you then?" asked the shorter man. Like Suar he spoke the bastard Hesperian of the ports of the Western Ocean, but with a strange spitting accent.

"I am Suar Peial of Amferé, by trade a singer of sweet songs. And you, good sir?"

The man made some curious sounds in his throat, as if he were imitating the growl of a dog.

"What said you?" asked Suar.

"I said my name was Ghw Gleokh. I suppose I should thank you for rescuing me."

"Your eloquence overwhelms me. Are you a stranger?"

"That I am," said Ghw Gleokh. "Help me bind up these cuts." As Suar bandaged Ghw's two slight wounds the latter inquired, "Could you tell me where in Kernê one can buy a drop of wine wherewith to wash down one's bread?"

Suar said, "I was on my way to Derende's tavern to ply my trade. I have no objection to your coming along."

As he spoke, Suar wiped his blade on the clothing of the nearest corpse, sheathed it, and turned away. He picked up his cloak and the bundles wrapped therein and resumed his course.

Ghw Gleokh trotted after him with the broadsword of the dead swordsman, for he had none of his own.

Suar walked steadily to Derende's tavern and shouldered his way around the leather curtain that served as a door. He had to duck to avoid hitting his head on the top of the door-frame, for he came from Poseidonis across the western seas—or Pusad as it was called—where six and a half feet was not unusual stature. A central hearth-fire crackled and snapped, its glow picking out faces bearded and faces bare, and its smoke forming a blue pall that crept sluggishly out the hole in the roof. It was a small fire, for Kernê never got really cold.

Suar threaded his way among the crowded benches, nodded to a couple of acquaintances, and eased his bundles on to Derende's serving counter. One was a battered old lyre; the other a provision-bag of coarse sacking which smelled strongly of sea-food, even above the many odors of the inn.

"Oh, it's the poet," said Derende, pushing his huge paunch up against the other side of the counter. "Well, vagabond?"

"Well indeed, mine host!" cried Suar. "I bring you, to cook for my supper, the very

queen of sea-creatures; the pearl among fish. Behold!"

He loosened the draw-string of the provision-bag and dumped out upon the counter a very large octopus. Ghw, who had been crowding behind him to see, leaped back with a hoarse cry.

"Gods!" he cried. "That is the world's monster for fair! Are you sure it is dead?"

"Quite sure," said Suar, grinning.

"No doubt you stole it from some poor fisherman," growled Derende.

"How the world misjudges an artist!" said Suar. "If I told you I had gotten it honestly you wouldn't believe me, so why should I argue? In any case, cook it properly with olive-oil and a few greens, and serve it up with a skin of the best green wine of Zhysk."

Derende began to gather up the octopus. "The greens and the oil you may have in return for your croaking, but any wine you will have to pay for."

"Alas! I had some trade-metal earlier today, but I got into a game of knucklebones. If you would let me have credit until I have sung and passed my scrip. . . ."

Derende shook his head. "In that case barley-beer will do for the likes of you."

"Lyr's barnacles!" exclaimed Suar. "How do you expect me to sing on that bilgewater?" He gestured towards the rest of the room. "You don't suppose all these people have crowded in here for love of your bitter beer and sour face, do you? They came to hear me. Who fills your stinking hovel night after night?"

"You heard me," said Derende. "Beer it shall be, or take your squawk elsewhere. I'll get in a girl; some bouncing bosomy wench who'll not only sing 'em but also—"

Ghw Gleokh stepped up and laid on the counter a small copper wedge, shaped like an ax-head in miniature and stamped with the flying-fish of Kernê.

"Here," he said in his weird accent. "Give us a sack of wine." Derende smiled at the coin.

"That is more the spirit," said Suar. "Master Derende, you old tub of lard, have you seen my friend Midawan the smith?"

"Not tonight," said Derende, lugging out a leather bottle and a couple of tarred leather drinking-jacks.

"He'll be in later, no doubt," said Suar. "What's news?"

Derende replied, "The Senate has hired a new wizard, a Tartessian named Barik."

"What happened to the old one?"

"They had him impaled because of that sandstorm."

"What is this?" asked Ghw with interest.

Derende explained. "He conjured up a sandstorm to overwhelm a camel-raid of desert-dwelling Lixitans, but by misdirection buried a score of our own warriors instead. What news have you, Suar?"

"Oh, young Okkozen, the son of Bulkajmi the Consul, was arrested for driving his chariot recklessly while drunk. Because of his connections, the magistrate let him off with an admonition. And Geddel the trader has been murdered in the Atlantean Mountains by a witch whom he tried to cheat out of her price for death-charms." Suar turned to his companion. "Good Ghw, let's find a seat, if we have to pitch one of these greasy Kearn-eans out on his rump. You shall share my beautiful octopus while I in return munch a piece of your bread."

"The bread you may have, because of my debt to you," said Ghw sourly, "but red-hot sword-blades would not force me to eat a piece of that hideous sea-monster."

"The bigger fool you." Suar, looking over the heads of the throng, pointed. "I see a bench as vacant as my purse. Come on."

The bench was one of two

flanking a corner table. Two men occupied the bench opposite with their backs against the wall, black cloaks drawn up over their heads. At first, Suar took them for Euskerians because of the cloaks, but as he sat down he became aware of an indefinable alienness about them. The younger and larger one, with the pimples, ate bread and cheese while the older and smaller did not eat, but inhaled the pungent smoke that rose from a tiny brazier on the table in front of him. They paid no attention to the new arrivals.

Suar rolled up his cloak and stuffed it under the bench, revealing that under it he wore the striped kilt of Poseidonis and an old shirt of what had been fine-grade wool, now much patched and mended. He pushed in to the wallward end of the bench, facing the small black-clad stranger, while Ghw likewise disposed of his cloak and took the other end. Suar poured out mugs of wine while Ghw went to work with his knife on the loaf of barley-bread he carried, now slightly soggy from the rain. Presently they were both munching and gulping.

Suar, his mouth full, asked, "My dear old comrade, what's that curious thing with which you were smiting the thieves,

like Zormê belaboring the Bruthonians? It looks like nothing I ever saw."

Ghw, a short man with reddish hair and arms of simian length, gave his companion a blank stare. "That is something I do not discuss," he growled.

Suar shrugged. "Be a louse, then." He twanged the strings of his lyre and spoke to the small man across the table. "Your pardon, sir, but that smoke does not impress me as a very nourishing diet. If you would like a piece of the finest octopus salad in Kernê, I shall be pleased to spare you a portion when it arrives, for the monster is too large for even my ample capacity."

The man looked up at last, his pupils mere dots in the flickering glow of the rush-light that stood in a little bronze holder in the middle of the table. He said, "Your intentions are meritorious, for which you shall receive credit in the ledgers of the gods. But know, mortal, that when the soul is properly fed, the body takes care of itself."

"Mortal yourself," said Suar. "It appears, then, that I shall have to eat the whole thing—"

"Not so," said a new voice. "I have brought it over to share it with you."

A dark man of medium height and enormous brawn, with some-

what Negroid hair and features, stood at the end of the table holding a great wooden platter on which was heaped up a pile of steaming pieces of cooked octopus. "Move that light, old giraffe, and change places with this red-haired one."

He slid the platter down the table, pulled up a stool, and planked down a slab of cheese, a half-loaf of bread, and a bag of jujubes as his contribution to the meal.

"No," said Suar. "This red-haired one is my friend, by virtue of my having just saved his life." Suar gave a slightly inflated account of the battle in the alley, adding, "His name is Ghw Gleokh, if you will believe it. If you can't say it, just clear your throat and you will come close enough. I should guess he hails from one of the barbarous and bloody Keltic tribes. Is that right, Ghw?"

"All but the part about our being barbarians. I am a Galathan. Who is this man?"

"My old friend, Midawan the armorer," said Suar. "He eats bronze spearheads for breakfast, and comes from Tegrizen, to the south, which is on the borders of Blackland. Though of partly Black descent he swears he has never tasted human flesh. I twit him about it when he vexes me."

"Some day you will twit me once too often," said Midawan, sitting down on the stool at the end of the table, "and I'll tie that swan's neck of your's in a knot. Here, Galathan, have a tentacle!"

"Take that slimy sea-creature away!" said Ghw. "Is there no such thing as an honest roast in Kernê?"

"Certainly," said Suar, "for the rich. We common folk deem ourselves lucky to taste one on the Feast of Korb. It was not so in my homeland, where we gorged on bison steaks every day. And speaking of hunting, is that mysterious bronze bar of yours some sort of weapon or hunting-implement?"

Ghw Gleokh had now drunk enough wine to have mellowed. He belched loudly and said, "You might say so; you might say so. It is in fact a magical tool of the highest power. When properly used neither man nor beast can stand before it."

At this point the larger and younger of the cloaked men across the table spoke. "Ha, hear the barbarian brag!"

Ghw stiffened. "Sir, I do not know you, but I do not let riff-raff speak to me in that manner."

"As to that," said the cloaked one, "I am Qahura, apprentice magician, and this is my master,

Semkaf. We come from the city of Typhon in the land of Setesh, whose magic is as far beyond yours as your is beyond the mud-pies of children."

"Quiet, fool," muttered the older magician, the one identified as Semkaf.

"But master, it is not meet that these savages should taunt and flout us. They must be taught a lesson."

"If there is any teaching to be done," said Ghw loudly, "I shall do it. I am an initiate druid of the Galatha, known to all, whereas I have never heard of your Typhon and doubt it exists."

Qahura said, "Indeed it exists, as you would learn soon enough did you visit us and were flayed upon our sacrificial altars. Typhon rises in black and purple from the mystic margins of the Sea of Thesh, amid the towering pyramidal tombs of kings who reigned in splendor over Setesh when mighty Torrutseish was but a village and golden Kernê but a vacant stretch of beach. No man living knows the full tale of Typhon's history, or the convolutions of its streets and secret passageways, or the hoarded treasure of its kings, or the hidden powers of its wizards. As for you," sneered the apprentice, "if you are a druid, where are your white robe

and crown of mistletoe? What are you doing in Kernê?"

"Oh, that, my bombastic young friend, is a matter of tribal politics. Our arch-druid died suddenly and some were evil-minded enough to say I had stabbed him."

Qahura said, "His vaunted druidic magic was evidently not able to turn knife-blades. Can you do anything besides read the weather signs?"

"All that you can do, and much besides. For instance, would you see the heroes of the Galatha?"

Without awaiting an answer Ghw swept his hand back and forth across the table, muttering a spell. At once a score of little figures, about the size of a man's thumb, appeared on the table, some afoot, some mounted, and some in scythe-wheeled chariots. Some wore barbarian trews while others were naked and painted in bizarre patterns. They darted about, their cries sounding in Suar's ears like the buzzing of gnats. A couple began to fight, lunging and slashing with swords the size of splinters.

"Ha!" said Qahura. "Dainty little mannikins, but one of the sacred cats of Setesh would make short work of them."

He cast a spell in his turn, whereupon a large yellow cat appeared upon the table. It

pounced on a miniature Galathan and began to worry it like a mouse. With a gesture Ghw swept the other heroes into nothingness, but the cat continued to bait its victim.

"All that you can do I can do, and better," said Ghw. "If you conjure up a familiar in the form of a cat, I will fetch one in that of a wolf, and we shall see—"

"Gentlemen!" said Suar, laying a hand on Ghw's arm. "Before this competition works up to lions and mammoths, consider that Derende's tavern is no place for fights between such creatures. They would squash us and the other customers like bugs in their struggles. Moreover I haven't yet sung my songs and passed my wallet. I urge that you wait until the weather clears and repair to an open field outside the walls, and then have at each other with your entire demonic retinues. The Kerneans would love the sport."

"There is something in what you say, poet," said Qahura. "Still, let it be understood that we of Setesh have the utmost contempt for any spells that this unfrocked druid could bring into action. For my master Semkaf commands the great serpent Apepis itself, which could swallow Master Ghw and all his minions at one gulp."

"I fear it not," said Ghw, reaching under the bench. "Here is the strongest spell of all. I have but to point it at you or any of your monsters and they will fall dead as though blasted by a levin-bolt."

He held up the object with which he had been defending himself against the robbers, a two-foot bronze tube open at one end and closed at the other, and fastened by bronze straps to a piece of carved wood extending beyond the closed end and terminating in a squared-off butt.

The elder Seteshan roused himself from his stupor again. "That is interesting, Galathan," he said. "While I am all Qahura says and more, never have I seen a wand like that. How does it work?"

Ghw took a big gulp of wine, hiccupped, and fumbled in his scrip. He brought out a fistful of a dark granular substance and poured it down the open end of the tube.

"One inserts this magical powder thus," he said. "Then one drops this leaden ball, molded to fit loosely into the tube, down upon the powder—thus. One thrusts down a wad of rag to hold the ball in place—thus. One sprinkles a little of the powder in at this small hole—thus. Then one lights the powder with any convenient flame, and with a

mighty flash and thunderclap the ball is driven through any object standing in the way. Fear not; I value the stuff too highly to waste it in mere demonstration before a pair of degenerate mountebanks."

"Why didn't you use it on the thieves?" asked Suar.

"Because it was not charged, and even if it had been, I had no fire wherewith to set it off."

The pin-points of Semkaf's eyes stared unwinkingly at the contraption. "And what," he purred, "is the composition of the powder?"

Ghw wagged his head with drunken solemnity. "That you shall never learn from me! It was confided to me by our lamented archdruid just before his mischance. When he lay dying from the cut he had unwittingly given himself, he bequeathed to me the device and all its secrets."

Midawan the smith, who hitherto had been too busy eating to take part in the conversation, spoke up. "I don't like your magical device, stranger. With power enough behind that ball it would pierce my strongest shield or breastplate. Then where would my trade be? At the bottom of the ocean!"

"High time, too," said Suar. "With these improvements in armor the fine old art of fence

is dying out. Now that men fight laden like lobsters with bronze plates and scales, they prefer to the rapier these clumsy broadswords to batter through the foe's defense. Mere wood-cutter's strokes, chop-chop."

"Times changé, and one must change with them," said Midawan.

"True, but that also applies to you," said Suar. "So you had better start working up a line of bronze lanterns and mirrors against the day when these things will have swept armor off the battlefield."

Semkaf leaned forward towards Ghw Gleokh. "I wish your device, mortal. Give it to me."

"Why, you insolent knave!" replied Ghw. "Are you mad? We slay men for less."

"Gentlemen!" said Suar. "Not here, pray! Or at least wait until I finish giving them the *Song of Vrir* and have collected my bounty. I'll rend your hearts with emotion. . . ." He hastily tuned his lyre.

Semkaf said, "What are your songs to me? I have no mortal emotions. I wish—"

"So you're like these greedy Kernean swine?" said Suar. "No appreciation of the arts; all they care for is trade-metal. Anyway, the device will do you no good without the formula for the powder."

"I can learn that through my arts at my leisure," said Semkaf. "Come, friend Ghw, I offer you in return that which is of the very highest value to you."

"And what is that, buffoon?" said Ghw.

"Only your life."

Ghw spat across the table, and followed this gesture by picking up his blackjack and throwing the lees of his wine into the Seteshan's face. "That for you!"

Semkaf wiped his narrow face with the edge of his cloak and turned his hawklike head towards his apprentice, murmuring, "These savages weary me. Slay them, Qahura."

Qahura wetted a finger in the spilt wine, drew a symbol on the table, and began to incant. Before the first sentence in the unknown tongue had rolled out, however, Ghw Gleokh raised the tube device in his right hand and set the wooden stock against his shoulder, so that the open end of the tube pointed towards Qahura's chest. With his left hand he picked up the rush-light and applied the flame to the little hole in the top of the tube.

There was a fizz, and a plume of yellow flame and sparks shot up from the hole. Almost instantly the room rocked to the crash of a tremendous explosion. Flame and smoke vomited out

from the open end of the tube, hiding Qahura from view.

While the room still rang with the echoes of the report, every other face in the tavern turned towards Suar's table. Then there were hoarse yells and the clatter of overturning tables and benches as the rest of the customers fought to get out, trampling one another in their panic. The cat conjured up by Qahura had vanished at the instant of the explosion. Suar coughed at the smell of burnt sulfur.

As the smoke cleared, Qahura, his eyelids drooping and his mouth hanging slackly open, fell forward across the table and lay with his smoke-blackened face in the spilt wine. Over his body, Semkaf and Ghw stared at one another. Ghw had dropped the tube and snatched up the broadsword that he had taken from the thief, but now he seemed to be struggling in the grip of some strange paralysis. Suar tried to rise, but found that he had gotten his legs entangled with the bench and with his cloak and his rapier.

"I underestimated you," said Semkaf, slipping a ring of reptilian form off his finger and making mystical motions with it. "*Antif maa-yb, 'oth-m-hru, Ape-pite!*"

Suar became aware of a horrid reptilian stench and the dry

slither of scales. He saw nothing, but on his right hand, Midawan the smith recoiled as from an unseen contact and Ghw Gleokh screamed an unearthly shriek. Something caught hold of the Galathan and dragged him off his bench to the floor. Suar, still trying to gain his feet, was astonished to observe that the ex-druid's right arm had vanished up to the shoulder.

The other customers had now nearly all crowded out through every aperture in the building. In a moment they were gone.

Midawan in one hulking motion drew a big broad knife from his belt and vaulted over the table diagonally from where he sat at the end, coming down almost in Suar's lap in the place where Ghw had sat. As he alighted, his right arm lashed out and drove the knife into Semkaf's chest, cutting into the middle of another sentence of anathema and sorcerous doom.

On the floor, Ghw was undergoing strange convulsions, as if some immense and invisible snake were squeezing him to death. His body bent and thrashed; blood spurted and bones cracked like sticks.

Suar got untangled from his gear, stepped back over the bench, and started for the door. He and Midawan were the last persons in the room except for

the three magicians. As Suar ran for the door, trailing his cloak and hugging his precious lyre, he paused to look back.

Semkaf now lay forward, face-down across the table like his apprentice beside him. On the floor Ghw Gleokh, bloody and distorted, had ceased to flop and writhe. He lay quietly, but now his head and most of his other arm had also vanished. In that last glance Suar saw the zone of invisibility slip down until only the lower half of Ghw's body and his legs were visible. Just as if one were watching a frog being swallowed head-first by an invisible snake. . . .

Outside, Suar and Midawan raced three blocks through the wet along Ocean Street before stopping to breathe. Suar asked, "Why did you kill Semkaf? It wasn't really our quarrel."

"Didn't you hear him tell Qahura to slay the lot of us? These he-witches are not nice in dealing out their dooms."

"How were you able to do it when Ghw was not?"

"I really don't know. I suppose because I was careful not to look him in the eye, and perhaps he was weak from the effects of that drug he was inhaling; the rose-of-death, if I know the smell."

"But now his private fiend is

loose without a master to banish it back to its own world!"

Midawan shrugged. "Those things usually go back of their own accord, I'm told. If we hear that Apepis is still slithering around town tomorrow we can go off to visit my cousins in Tegrazen. Besides, Semkaf would have learned the secrets of the thunder-tube, and if the thing had come into general use, that would have been bad for my trade."

Suar Peial became aware that Midawan was carrying the tube-depice in question. As he spoke, the smith threw the thing gyrating far out into the bay. Suar heard a faint splash as it struck

the water invisibly in the dark and sank.

"*Hé*" said Suar. "If you didn't want it, I could have sold the bronze for the price of several meals. As I had no chance to sing tonight, Lyr only knows when I shall eat again, let alone drink a skin of wine or bounce a wench."

"Such things are better out of reach," said Midawan. "And I can stake you to a meal or two. Not that it really worries me, you understand. We should have to improve our craft, no doubt; but no magical toy like that will ever put us out of business. Yes, sir, armor is here to stay!"

WITCHCRAFT IN RUSSIA

A correspondent in Mexico City, Diego Vedras, has written to us about one of the most incredible events of the decade. Senar Vedras has befriended a refugee, a fear-stricken man who fled from behind the iron curtain.

The man's story is a strange one and most disconnected. A group of people, some of them obviously insane from the description, came together in his remote Siberian town. Fanatics, White Russians, demonists and madmen, they were united by a common goal. They sought the death of the man they felt responsible for all of Russia's woes—Josef Stalin.

Many ways were suggested but the plan decided to be the most feasible was the use of witchcraft! A devil doll was constructed with the proper ceremony and the first pin inserted.

This was the day that Stalin fell ill.

More pins were inserted until the final one penetrated the doll's heart. This was the day Stalin died. Word had leaked out about the group's operation and they were forced to flee.

The man lost all his baggage on his way to Mexico, he had only a small wax doll, its body transfixed by a score of pins.

THE APPRENTICE SORCERER

BY STEPHEN ARR.

Ralph had always found Marilyn bewitching, but her talents couldn't help him when he faced a full-fledged sorcerer.

Five years to the day had passed since that Halloween night when I found Marilyn lying limp and pale on the lawn beside the shattered remnants of a broomstick and carried her into my house. She never left. Somewhere along the way we found time to get married, with the aid of a forged birth certificate, and we lived happily together.

Of course there were the usual problems of adjustment faced by every couple. Writers are temperamental people, and occasionally I would stop in at a bar for a drink and get lost for several hours, but Marilyn never said a word of reproach when I finally came home somewhat worse for wear. On the other hand I soon got used to the idea that as the moon grew fatter

in the sky she would get a little restless, and finally when a full moon hung above the house she would take her favorite broom and walk out into the night not to return until morning. I never asked questions. About the only thing I did was to quietly hang a green and a red light on the chimney so that there would be no more accidents.

Of course there were a few awkward moments, like the time our next door neighbor, Mrs. Marx, walked in the open door and saw Marilyn at her housework. Both Marilyn and I dashed for the broom that was busily sweeping the living room by itself, and it took several hours and a half dozen cocktails to convince Mrs. Marx that she had not seen what she had.

And then there was the time

shortly after her arrival when I heard through the backyard news service that cats were disappearing at a fast rate from the neighborhood. Marilyn and I had a long talk, and after that the cats disappeared from other sections of the city.

We had no children, but we were happy with each other. Marilyn was beautiful, and everyone liked her. She was very small, barely five feet, and slim, but her figure had the roundness of a mature woman. She had long raven black hair and the blackest eyes ever seen, while her skin was as white as milk.

Halloween, in a way, was our anniversary, but I knew that it would be unfair for me to expect her to remain home on this night, of all the nights of the year. Still, I waited up in the large easy chair in the living room, reading one of my own novels, my favorite reading matter, with a bottle of Vermouth for company.

At three A.M. the front door opened. I glanced at my watch to check the time. It was much too early for Marilyn to be coming back.

But it was Marilyn, and I only had to take one look at her face to see that something was wrong. Even the way she trailed her broom after her bespoke depression. Then I saw that some-

one else was following her. As he came into the light of the living room I saw that in many ways he resembled Marilyn. He was small, about five and a half feet, slim, with the same jet hair and black brooding eyes. But his complexion was swarthy and he wore a small waved mustache and a pointed goatee. Over his shoulders there was slung a black cape. He was very handsome in a satanic fashion. Naturally I disliked him intensely at first sight.

"Ralph," Marilyn said, approaching my chair slowly. I could see tears in her eyes. "I must say good-bye. Sorcerer Bascombe has claimed me, according to the promise made by my parents, and I must go."

"Sit down Marilyn," I said. "Sit down, uh, Sorcerer Bascombe. Have a glass of Vermouth, and let's talk this over."

"No Ralph," Marilyn said tapping her small foot in vexation, a large tear brimming from her right eye and running down her cheek, "there is nothing to talk over. I must go, Sorcerer Bascombe has claimed me."

"Claimed you for what?" I asked.

"To be my wife," Sorcerer Bascombe said, stepping forward with a sardonic smile.

Seldom had I seen such perfect white teeth. I could not help

but think what a pleasure it would be to push the toe of my shoe into them. "I believe that Marilyn and I are married," I said stiffly. "We have a paper somewhere around here to prove it. If you can wait a few weeks, I'll be glad to find it for you."

"Oh, you don't understand." Marilyn said, and now she was really crying, "that marriage didn't mean anything. We don't recognize it. It wasn't performed during a full moon in a graveyard by a duly accredited ghoul."

"So you see, she must go with me," Sorcerer Bascombe said in a smug voice.

"Surely," I said, "There must be something I can do. Talk to her parents or something."

"No," Marilyn sobbed, "my parents have made an agreement and cannot, under the provisions of section 2 of the Combined Witches and Demons Code, change it."

"Of course you can challenge me to a duel to the death for her," Sorcerer Bascombe said with a broad smile. I could see that the idea did not displease him.

"Oh no," Marilyn cried, and she looked at me pleadingly, "you can't do that."

"Why not?" I demanded, "I used to be pretty handy with my fists, a forty-five and/or epee."

"But don't you see," Marilyn

wailed, and it did my heart good to see that she was suffering for me, "Sorcerer Bascombe is a class A Sorcerer. He'd burn you to a crisp before you could even get near him. Please let me go with him now, for your own good."

"Suppose I did challenge you," I asked my saturnine rival, stalling for time, "when do we try and blow each other's brains out?"

"At the time of the next full moon, that would be a week from now." Sorcerer Bascombe was licking his lips like a satisfied cat.

"And Marilyn stays put until the matter is decided?" I asked.

Marilyn looked from one of us to the other with wide, frightened eyes.

"Under the law, Marilyn stays put," Sorcerer Bascombe said. He was not unhappy about the thought. He had decided that it would be worth it to kill me off, and he was supremely confident that he could do it.

"All right," I said. "A week with Marilyn is worth more to me than a lifetime without her. Consider yourself challenged, Sorcerer Bascombe, and please withdraw as soon as possible to allow us to begin to enjoy our week uncontaminated by your repulsive presence."

"No, No, Ralph," Marilyn in-

terraptured wildly. "You can't."

"I have," I said.

"He has," Sorcerer Bascombe said triumphantly, and faded out right there in the middle of the room.

"Is he gone?" I asked uneasily.

"He's gone," Marilyn said distraught. "Oh why did you do it, you crazy scribbler? You haven't a chance."

"Shut your mouth, little one," I said, "and come here. We've got to cram a lifetime into a week."

Marilyn came.

The next day I decided that I had no intention of going to slaughter without a fight, and I started prying into those things I had studiously ignored for the past five years.

"After all," I said to Marilyn, "I've found you to be a very material woman, solid and substantial, so I don't think there's anything supernatural about you at all. Try and tell me just how you do your stuff."

"I can't tell you much," Marilyn said thoughtfully. "However I've learned something about your science, and all I can say is that we just naturally do these things. I can generate the energy to fly a broomstick just as you can eat sugar and turn its matter into energy to

heat your body. No one can explain how it's done. You just do it. It's part of you. Sorcerer Bascombe," she said, tears coming into her eyes again, "can burn you to a crisp without even knowing how he's doing it, any more than you know where the energy comes from to lift your arm."

Her mention of energy certainly gave me something to hang my hopes on. "Tell me," I asked excitedly, "do you ever have trouble doing your stuff? That is, when you are near a radio station or something? Or in daylight?"

"Why yes," she said, her eyes glowing as she realized that we were making progress. "Those new things they've put up, radar, really make flying pretty rocky. I don't know anyone who ever had an accident because of it, but everyone agrees that they make you work awfully hard to stay up."

I got up and started pacing restlessly around the room. "That's it," I said. "Don't you see, these things that you do must be the result of some sort of energy that you generate naturally and release in waves similar to radio or radar, if radar causes interference."

"Why sure," I added as another idea struck me, "don't you use figurines to operate on

when the object of your dislike is not close at hand?"

"Yes," Marilyn replied puzzled. "The figurine must be a pretty exact copy of the original made out of copper and several other metals according to a very precise formula."

"That fits," I said excitedly. "Don't you realize that all radio is based on the idea that your set is in tune with the station. Now when you make an exact replica of the victim, it is in tune with him. You shoot your waves into it and they are broadcast to the victim."

"Why Ralph," Marilyn said, the love light shining in her black eyes, "you're wonderful. What are you going to do now?"

"Oh that," I said like a punctured balloon. "I don't know. I guess I'll go down to the library and cram up on radio and radar and see what I come up with."

For the next five days I divided my time pretty evenly between Marilyn and endless volumes of technical books in the library. However my first hopes of finding out how that Bascombe did his stuff and building a machine to duplicate it were pretty well shattered. Our science was a thousand years away from discussing anti-gravity waves, much less giving hints on how to build equipment for it at home. Nor were there any handy

little blueprints for death rays for the home craftsman. Only on the fifth day did I get a glimmer of hope. It was a very slim glimmer, but by that time I was in a mood to clutch at any straws floating about.

During all this time Marilyn had been wonderfully brave, and also wonderful in other more important ways. Women do like to be died for, it builds up their egos and is much more flattering than sending them flowers.

"Can you get in touch with Sorcerer Bascombe?" I asked her on the evening of the fifth day.

"Of course," she replied, but added a bit stiffly, "however you know that under the codes you can't back out now."

"I don't want to back out, I just want to see friend Bascombe for a few moments," I reassured her. "Could you arrange it for tonight?"

"Certainly," she replied, giving me a warm smile.

Some fifteen minutes later Sorcerer Bascombe in all his satanic splendor materialized in the center of the living room. "You wanted to see me?" he sneered.

"Yes," I replied.

He strutted up to me. "You know, once a challenge has been made, it can't be withdrawn," he said, sneering again. It was becoming monotonous.

"I know," I said quietly.

I don't know what he expected. He probably thought that I was going to plead for mercy, and he was prepared to cut a great figure before Marilyn's eyes.

"Well what do you want?" He demanded, a slightly bewildered tone creeping into his voice.

"Why to see you, of course," I answered simply.

"Well, you've seen me," he said somewhat exasperated.

"So I have," I said, "now go away."

He turned red and shot me a look chock full of malevolence, then without saying another word he disappeared again. Only a puff of yellow smoke remained where he had been. He certainly had been hot.

"And that," I said to Marilyn's puzzled eyes, "is that. Let's retire. Only 48 hours left."

The full moon threw eerie and distorted shadows across the green grass carpet of the graveyard. Things half seen in its cold light fluttered past me as I stumbled awkwardly towards the duelling ground. Marilyn led the way, walking confidently through that confusing city of stone. It was already a quarter to twelve. We stopped at a level place between two ornate marble mausoleums. Sorcerer Bascombe was already there. He smiled broadly when he saw me, and

threw his black cape back over his shoulders. I managed a weak smile in return.

I glanced at my watch. Five minutes to twelve. In five minutes I would be facing a class A champion Sorcerer with nothing more than an untested home made gadget literally up my sleeves. For Marilyn could not help me with her witchcraft. If she tried, the umpires would take immediate and drastic action.

A little-red-riding-hood type hood, completely empty as far as I could see, detached itself from the shadowy crowd that was thickening around us, and floated over to the other end of the grassy clearing where Sorcerer Bascombe was promenading up and down exuding confidence.

"His second," Marilyn whispered to me.

I felt something like a five pronged stick hit me sharply on the back, and I turned to look into the face of a grinning skeleton. At least I thought he was grinning, but I've had very little experience with skeletons, and maybe I misread his expression. In any case, he was showing a lot of teeth, and making no bones about it.

"Never say die," he said. His teeth clattered together unpleasantly on each word.

"I won't," I promised. "I can

see why you might be somewhat sensitive about the subject."

"This is your second," Marilyn whispered urgently. "It is one minute to twelve, I must leave the grounds now."

We wound ourselves around each other and clung for a moment. I could taste the salty tears that ran down her cheeks to where our mouths pressed together.

The long skeleton hand of my second separated us. "Smile," I called to Marilyn as she backed away.

She managed a wan smile. I could see her black eyes and jet hair fading into the darkness as she backed into the circle of spectators just as the clock on the church steeple began to slowly toll the hour.

On the twelfth crash of the hammer, Sorcerer Bascombe again threw his cape back over his shoulder and strode forward confidently. There was a cruel smile on his swarthy face. For the first time that night I felt real fear. I wasn't afraid to die, but there was a look on his face that warned me that he would not try to kill me cleanly, but would play with me as a cat with a mouse if he had the chance.

I moved forward slowly. When he was about three yards from me, Sorcerer Bascombe suddenly

whipped up both hands, pointed them at me, and a look of intense concentration wiped the evil grin from his face.

This is it, I thought, and my heart almost stopped beating. With sudden decision I put down my head and charged. If I only could get my hands on him.

Something like an invisible tank stopped me cold with a bang, then calmly ran right on over me leaving me pressed into the ground feeling like a pancake. A wave of force, I guessed, would be the technical explanation.

A sound like a sigh in a cavern of echoes rose from the crowd. I painfully groped my way to my feet, and saw Sorcerer Bascombe, looking a lot worse for wear with his cape muddy and grass-stained, pulling himself stiffly up. There was a puzzled look on his face, the grin was gone.

He moved his hands up again, concentrated harder, and I could see that he intended to give it more power this time. I still had the breath pretty well knocked out of me, and I didn't have it in me to charge again. I just stood unsteadily on my feet and let him do his stuff. It was his show.

This time a solid wall of wind picked me up and carried me back a good five yards through

the air until I was stopped rather sharply by the open arms of a marble angel perched on the Mausoleum behind me. After dropping on the sod, I crawled a little towards Sorcerer Bascombe before I could gather the strength to rise. Even then it was fifty-fifty whether I could make it or not. On a slowly spinning grassy clearing I could see Sorcerer Bascombe lifting his hands stiffly again. A look of desperation and fear covered his face, and blood was trickling down from a cut over his left eye. His cape was gone, ripped off his back. He concentrated for a long time, aiming carefully. This was it, full power with no brakes on. I groggily stared at him wondering which of us was getting the worst of it, and if I could survive another blast.

It came. I can't say much about what happened. It was as though someone had hit me on the forehead with an invisible sledge-hammer. One brief shock and it was all over. The cemetery flowed into a dizzying pool of swirling blackness that faded into nothingness.

The last thing I saw was the face of Sorcerer Bascombe. It swelled up, large and terrible, then disappeared. I couldn't tell if it was going away—or if I was. I fought to hold the vision,

but it was slipping. Unconsciousness overwhelmed me.

I came to slowly. Each bone and muscle in my body had its individual ache. I tried to sit up and yelped as a dozen muscles protested violently. A small gentle hand pushed me down. I opened my eyes and was greeted by the sight of Marilyn's face above me. She was smiling happily, but there were undried tears in the corners of her eyes. I turned my aching neck slightly and saw that my head was resting on her lap. We were still in the grassy space in the cemetery, but the moon was gone, and the Eastern sky was ablaze with the rising sun.

"That was quite a haymaker," I said, moving my left arm gingerly. "Who won?"

"You did darling," Marilyn said leaning down and kissing me. "They carried the remains of Sorcerer Bascombe away in a small basket. He won't be bothering us again."

"Well, that's that," I said in a business-like tone that only quivered a little. I pulled myself up on to my feet, leaning heavily against Marilyn's small body.

Though a little unsteady, I could stand. With fumbling fingers I started pulling wires out of my sleeves and pants legs. There was quite a pile of them by the time I finished. I reached

into the pocket of my jacket and pulled out the small copper image of Sorcerer Bascombe.

"So that's how you did it," Marilyn said, nodding her head slowly in comprehension.

"Yes," I said. "It was really quite simple. The only thing that surprised me was that it worked. You remember the day I asked Sorcerer Bascombe to come to the house. Well I had a barrage of concealed cameras ready, and I took the pictures to old Ed Longly, that sculptor down the street, and he turned out a pretty good replica. All I had to do after that was to wire myself like a walking aerial with all leads to the image of your late suitor in my pocket. Every time Sorcerer Bascombe threw a bolt at me, he got it broadcast right back at

him. After I saw it worked, my only worry was which of us was going to get the worst of it. It seems that he was."

"Oh darling," Marilyn said throwing her arms around me, "I'm so happy. And do you know what else happened?"

"No," I said a little hesitantly.

"You've been recognized as a full fledged Sorcerer on the basis of your victory over Bascombe, we'll be able to be married by a real ghoul and ride by broomstick together and go to all the meetings together and everything. Isn't that wonderful?"

I answered by taking her in my arms and giving her a long kiss, then with a sigh I picked up my little pile of wires and pushed them into my pocket. I had a feeling that I would be needing them again.

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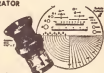


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